Towards a Relational Perspective on Higher-Level Learning and Skill: Graduate Employability and Managerial Competence

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Abstract

The thesis presents a critique of the 'learning and competence agenda', ie currently-dominant approaches to graduate employability and managerial competence expressed in terms of learning *as a process*, and of transferable skills, competence, etc as *outcomes* of learning. The thesis argues that this agenda is based on a set of assumptions, referred to as the 'conventional model of learning and competence', which is highly contestable. Key assumptions include that of learning as an *individualised* process *sui generis*, resulting in *outcomes* ('skills', 'competencies' etc), causally related to behaviour or performance.

Using both primary and secondary evidence, the claims made for the conventional model are shown *not* to be upheld. This is taken as warranting more fundamental consideration of the conventional model. It is argued that the 'common sense' appeal of the model arises from the *systematic ambiguity* of the term 'learning' (and other word-forms from the verb 'to learn'). Conceptual analysis and clarification shows that the language of 'learning', 'skills' and so on relates to ways of expressing aspects of behaviour or performance. The thesis argues that performance is not objectively observable, but requires the construal or interpretation of activity as performance-of-a-kind. Drawing on various interpretive and constructionist traditions within the social sciences, this analysis is taken forward to develop a *relational perspective on learning and competence*. It is argued that, the notions of (social) 'practices' and 'emergent identity' are critical to such a perspective.

The relational perspective is applied to the reconsideration of interviews with recent graduates and novice managers, particularly in respect of analysing career trajectories in terms of 'modalities of emergent identity'. The forms of warranting of identity claim are also examined. The thesis concludes with a consideration of implications of the relational perspective, for further research, for policy and for pedagogic practice.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

A note on language

Effort has been taken to ensure that non-sexist language is used in the thesis. The convention of using pronouns in the third person plural form *as singular* ('they', 'them','their') is adopted to avoid the use of *both* masculine and feminine forms, in the interests of economy of expression. On some occasions, such use appears to breach grammatical rules (eg the word 'themself', rather than 'themselves', for 'himself or herself', or 'him/ herself'), but the value of the convention in terms of inclusivity of language has been taken to over-ride the formality of grammar.

Where gender-specific language is used by cited authors, in contexts where it is clear that this is inappropriate (ie the reference is not to someone who is specifically male - or female), then this is modified except in the case of direct quotations. No comment is made on other authors' use of non-inclusive language.

Chapter 1

The Learning and Competence Agenda:

Re-opening the Debate

1.1 The nature of the thesis: reframing the theory and practice of higher-level learning and competence

As employability[1] has risen in importance within higher education policy[2], the measures concerned with translating such policy into practice raise important issues regarding their theoretical framing. Whilst the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) had emphasised that the aims of higher education include that of 'instruction in skills' relevant to employment, little systematic attention was paid to this until the early 1980s[3]. In 1984, in a joint statement, the University Grants Committee (UGC[4]) and the National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB) argued that

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1 Hillage and Pollard (1998) note that employability is a 'fairly nebulous concept' in the literature they studied, suggesting two points of origin of the concept: (i) the changing nature of the employment contract between employers and employees (employability being offered rather than employment security), and (ii) the change of public policy on employment (skills-based approaches to economic competition and work-based solutions to social deprivation) (Hillage and Pollard, 1998: 4)

2 Employability was a key theme of the speech on higher education, given by David Blunkett, Secreatry of State for Education and Employment, at Greenwich University, 15th February, 2000 (Blunkett, 2000). This was described as a 'landmark speech' by the Department for Education and Employment. It is clear from the site at which it was delivered (formerly Woolwich College) and the citations within the speech, that Blunkett wished the speech to be compared with that by his predecessor, Crosland, in 1965, shortly after publication of the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), announcing the expansion of higher education through the establishment of vocationally-oriented polytechnics.

3 We may note two key influences that appear to be significant: first, concerns that there would be an 'overproduction' of graduates arose in the context of the return of large scale unemployment (Lyon and Murray, 1993), and secondly, the rise of the 'new vocationalism' in secondary and further education following the 'Great Debate' initiated by Prime Minister Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College speech. (Bates et al., 1984; Dale, 1985).

4 See appendix 1 for a list of abbreviations and acronyms.

'instruction in skills' should focus on 'transferable intellectual and personal skills' (NAB/ UGC, 1984: 4). Over the subsequent period, the emphasis upon the employment-oriented aims of higher education has been presented mainly in terms of the notion of 'transferable skills'[5]; various initiatives at national, institutional, and departmental levels have been undertaken to identify such skills, and to develop pedagogic practices to enable students acquire and develop them. The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) endorsed this 'skills agenda' (Fallows and Steven, 2000), as did the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP, 1998)[6]. In a key policy speech in February 2000, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, stated that "the development of transferable skills should become universal in the [higher education] sector" (Blunkett, 2000). Viewed as a 'common sense issue' (Murphy and Otter, 1999)[7], debate on the theoretical framing of the skills agenda, on the assumptions on which it is based, has been limited and, arguably, prematurely closed. This thesis seeks to re-open that debate.

Moreover, the skills agenda in higher education has arisen within the wider context increasing emphasis upon the notion of 'competence' in debates concerning the relevance of post-compulsory education and training for the employment arena

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5 Various terms have been adopted, usually combining one or more of 'transferable', 'personal', 'generic', 'core', and 'key' with 'skills', 'competencies' (or 'competences'), 'abilities' or 'capabilities'. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) used the term' key skills', which now appears to have become the most common term used in respect of the skills agenda.

6 The CVCP Report (CVCP, 1998) was commissioned prior to the publication of the Dearing Report, indicating the degree of conventional acceptance of the 'skills agenda', at least at the level of institutional senior management.

7 cf Fallows and Steven (2000) who refer to "skills matters" (as presented by most contributors to their edited collection) as "widely accepted as norms" (Fallows and Steven, 2000: 16).

(Central Policy Review Staff, 1980; MSC, 1981a; Institute of Manpower Studies, 1984; De Ville, 1986; Burke, 1989) (see table 1.1 for time-line of key events regarding issues addressed in this thesis). Following Government acceptance of the De Ville report (De Ville, 1986), competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were developed for various occupations, within a five-level framework (see table 1.2). Whilst NVQs at the higher levels, 4 and 5, were developed in only a few occupational areas, and very few certificates at these levels have actually been awarded, the *occupation of management* is the one area where such NVQs were developed early and heavily marketed. This may, to some degree, be due to the fact that the notion of 'management competence' (or 'competency'[8]) was already well-established in the management education, training and development (METD) field, in large because of the seminal work in USA by McBer and Company (Boyatzis, 1981). This thesis will examine the notion of management competence which, it will be shown, is based on similar assumptions to that of the skills agenda in higher education, and thus subject to challenge on the similar conceptual and theoretical grounds.

A further area for examination in this thesis is that of the emphasis upon '*learning*', in policy developments and in the advocacy of change in pedagogic practice. A whole new vocabulary has developed, with the word 'learning' being included in key phrases used in discussions and statements on post-compulsory education policy: 'learning society', 'learning cities', 'learning organisations',

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8 The question as to whether there is a substantive distinction between 'competence' and 'competency', and not merely a matter of spelling convention, will be discussed in chapter 2.

'learning culture', 'lifelong learning', 'learning accounts', 'Campaign for Learning'[9]. Similarly, in pedagogic practice, in higher education, and in management education, training and development, we now encounter phrases such as 'learning outcomes', 'learning process', 'learning and teaching strategy'[10], 'independent learning', 'experiential learning'. Undergraduate and postgraduate students, and participants on management training and development programmes, are now routinely referred to as 'learners'. This thesis will argue that these developments signify more than 'mere' vocabulary change: they are a development of the competence and skills agenda discussed above. We shall refer to this as the ***'learning and competence agenda'***.

Under the learning and competence agenda, we shall argue, learning is presented as a process *sui generis*, separate from the processes of teaching and training. The learning process is regarded as a *natural* part of being human, mostly taking place *outside* of formal educational and training contexts. By understanding this process better, it is suggested by proponents of the agenda, pedagogic practices may be developed so as to 'facilitate' it better. In particular, learning is also now seen as an *activity*, undertaken by the *learner* (ie learn-*er*, a 'doer' of learning); various forms of 'self-managed' and 'learner-directed' learning are promoted by protagonists for the learning and competence agenda. As with the skills agenda in higher education, this emphasis upon learning is generally treated as 'common sense'.

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9 The Campaign for Learning was established by the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) in 1995 (Maxted, 1996). The RSA had earlier, in 1988, established the Higher Education for Capability initiative, a key influence in the development of the skills agenda (see, eg, Drew, 1998).

10 Dunne comments that in the UK "it is no longer politically correct to say: 'teaching and learning'; it must be: 'learning and teaching', as if the change in word order would, magically, promote changes in practice." (Dunne, 1999c: 206)

Table 1-1 Timeline of key events in respect of issues addressed in thesis: graduate employability and managerial competence

Year	Event	Significance
1976	Ruskin College speech by Prime Minister James Callaghan	Initiates 'Great Debate' in education; increasing emphasis upon vocationalist outcomes of education
1981	New Training Initiative (MSC 1981a, 1981b; DE/ DES, 1981)	calls for 'standards of a new kind' for vocational education and training; emphasises 'competence'
1984	NAB/ UGC joint statement on 'Higher Education and the Needs of Society' (NAB/ UGC, 1984)	introduces notion of 'transferable intellectual and personal skills'
1984	'Competence and Competition' (IMS, 1984)	states that UK education and training compares unfavourably with that in competitor countries, to detriment of competitiveness
1986	De Ville Working Party Report of Review of Vocational Qualifications (De Ville, 1986)	introduction of notion of NVQ as 'statement of competence'; establishment of NCVQ
1986	Government lifts 'capping' on numbers entering HE	beginning of move towards 'mass'higher education
1987	Handy Report (Handy et al. 1987) and Constable & McCormick Report (Constable and McCormick, 1987)	initiates debate about management education, training and development in UK; leads to establishment of MCI
1988	Enterprise in Higher Education initiative (EHE) begins	Announced in 1987, DE funding for IHEs to include 'enterprise skills' in HE curricula
1988	Higher Education for Capability established by RSA	extends the 'Capability movement' in education to higher education, to promote notion of 'capable graduates'
1991	MCI Management Standards introduced	new qualification for managers, claimed to be competence-based
1992	End of *formal* binary divide in HE as polytechnics gain university status (under statute)	unitary system for funding
		continued ...

1994	Government calls for development of NVQ framework to level 5; CVCP Paper 'A Strategy for Vocational Higher Education'; Employment Department Consultation Paper 'A Vision for Higher Level Vocational Qualification' HEQC starts 'Graduate Standards Programme'	NVQs now cover all levels, including those equivalent to postgraduate level. Increasing debate on vocational relevance of HE; proposal that some degree level qualifications may be assessed in same manner as NVQs, through work-based experience
1996	HEQC 'paper to stimulate discussion' on 'graduateness' (HEQC, 1996)	proposed search for 'common attributes' of all graduates
1997	Labour Government elected	new Government with large majority able to set HE policy for many years
	Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997)	sets key terms for policy advocacy; endorses employability as key aim of HE; emphasises key skills and learning
	Govt announce introduction of charges to HE students for tuition fees, abolition of maintenance grant after first year	increased emphasis on returns to students through enhanced employability
1998	CVCP Report on 'Skills development in higher education' (CVCP, 1998)	endorses emphasis upon development within HE of skills for employment
	The Learning Age 'Green Paper'	emphasis upon 'learning', 'lifelong learning' and 'lifelong learners'
2000	Speech by David Blunkett, 15 February	emphasis upon employability and skills; announcement of plans for 2 year foundation degrees and move towards participation rate of 50%

Table 1.2 The Five-Level Framework of NVQs

Level 1 -	competence in the performance of a range of varied work activities, most of which may be routine and predictable;
Level 2 -	competence in a significant range of varied work activities, performed in a variety of contexts. Some of the activities are complex or non-routine, and there is some individual responsibility or autonomy. Collaboration with others, perhaps through membership of a work group of team, may often be a requirement;
Level 3 -	competence in a broad range of varied work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy, and control or guidance of others is often required;
Level 4 -	competence in a broad range of complex, technical or professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and the allocation of resources is often present;
Level 5 -	competence which involves the application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountabilities for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

Source: NCVQ, 1991: 4

This thesis will challenge what we have termed the 'learning and competence agenda' *in respect of a key area of its application*, that of *seeking to promote employability*. Under the prescriptions of the learning and competence agenda, it is assumed, students in higher education will be better (than hitherto) prepared for entry into graduate employment if they acquire and develop the key, transferable skills sought by employers (CVCP, 1998). Universities should, under such a view, therefore provide opportunities for such skills acquisition and development within their curricula; they should also provide support for extra-curricular activities, and opportunities for students' to reflect on and learn from their experience in such activities. Assessment of skills may be added to, or incorporated into, traditional forms of assessment, particularly in the form of a 'profile' or 'record of achievement' (CNAA, 1992b; Fenwick et al., 1992; Assiter and Shaw, 1993; CVCP et al., 1999a, 1999b). Employers will then be better able to recognise the abilities of graduates applying for jobs, and so students will better prepared for a smooth trajectory from their period of studentship into graduate employment. Once in employment, graduates will be able to transfer into the workplace and job the skills developed during their time at university.

Similarly, it is assumed, individuals aspiring to managerial positions, or already 'novice managers', should develop, particularly through experience-based learning, the competencies required for effective managerial performance; demonstration of these will enable them to be recognised, and

appropriately certificated, as suitable for employment and progression in managerial positions.

If such prescriptions were valid, we might expect to find evidence of such validity in terms of employment outcomes[11]. In this thesis we shall examine two forms of evidence to consider issues of validity of the claims made for the learning and competence agenda. First, we shall consider the accounts given by recent graduates and by novice managers, in interviews concerning their trajectories into their current employment situation. Analysis of these transcripts will show that the prescriptions of the learning and competence agenda, outlined above, do *not* reflect the *reported experiences* of the individuals interviewed. Secondly, we shall examine the secondary evidence to ascertain whether the *claims* made of the agenda are borne out by the *outcomes*. The thesis will argue that such evidence does not support the claims made. On the basis of such lack of supportive empirical evidence, it will be argued, the assumptions on which the learning and competence agenda is based warrant, and should be subject to, critical investigation and analysis.

This thesis will therefore challenge the framing of the assumptions made, within the learning and competence agenda, about the key notions of learning and competence (and of competencies, skills, and other cognates). It

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11 The notion of employability may be seen emphasising supply-side of the relationship between individuals and the labour market (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), separating initiatives and interventions on this from the fluctuating demand for labour. However, unless it is possible to detect some link between initiatives taken to promote employability and actual employment outcomes, the notion of employability can have little positive meaning for the parties concerned.

will argue that the learning and competence agenda is based on a set of conceptual and theoretical assumptions, called here the '***conventional model of learning and competence***'[12]. Such assumptions will be examined and it will be argued that there are serious flaws arising at least in part from *systematic ambiguity*[13] of the term 'learning' (as process and outcome), and of the terms 'competence', 'competency', 'skills' and other cognates. By undertaking rigorous analysis of the key concepts, it will be claimed that the logical relationship between 'learning', 'competencies' ('skills' etc) and various concepts used to refer to human behaviour (particularly 'performance'[14]) is such that the conventional model is seriously flawed. By taking account of the conceptual analysis to be presented, an alternative model of learning and competence in respect of the issues of concern will be developed, drawing upon a range of social science approaches which emphasise the *processual,*

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12 The use of the term 'conventional' is intended to indicate that the model of learning and competence is now accepted as the norm, the dominant understanding by those who are protagonists for the learning and competence agenda. Moreover, much of the debate is itself framed within the same set of assumptions. We might also refer to it as a 'new orthodoxy'. This is not to say that it is widely shared by staff in higher education who are *not* directly involved in the discussions and debates on these issues; however, neither is there evidence of an *alternative* model that is widely shared by such staff (see Dunne, 1999a).

13 That is, as ambiguity which arises because "words or expressions that may always have the same meaning when applied to one kind of thing, ... [may] have a different meaning when applied to another kind of thing." (Flew, 1979: 11). It will be argued in chapter 7 of this thesis that the 'kind of thing' indexed by these key terms differs between various contexts of use.

14 The term 'performance' is a key one in the technical specification of competence in the NVQ system. In the USA, an alternative to the phrase 'competence-based education' has been 'performance-based education' (Tuxworth, 1989).

relational character of the human social world[15]. The alternative model, referred to as the '***relational perspective***', will be used to consider the experiences of recent graduates and novice managers, as presented in interviews undertaken as part of the empirical research for this thesis. The relational perspective will be elaborated in the light of such research, and its further potential applications discussed in terms of research, pedagogic practice and policy development.

1.2 Focus and context of research

The explicit issues of concern in this thesis are those relating to the processes by which:

- individuals move from being students in higher education to being graduates seeking and gaining (or failing to gain) employment *as graduates*,

and

- individual seek to move into (first-line) management positions ('novice managers') on the basis of some understanding that they are appropriately qualified (by virtue of their learning and competence) to do so.

The question as to *whether* or not higher education *should* have some relationship to the occupational order is, of course, a matter of contestation,

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15 Particularly symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and the recent developments in social psychology which draw upon these and upon ethogenics (Harré and Secord, 1972) and social constructionism (eg Smith et al., 1995; Harré and Stearns, 1995; Hosking et al., 1995).

the subject of debate between the so-called 'liberal' (or 'liberal humanist') position and 'vocationalism' (see Silver and Brennan, 1988, for review). As indicated above, both the Robbins Committee Report (Robbins, 1963) and the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) explicitly assert that there *is* some such relationship. Moreover, recent and current government policy indicate there is an *expectation* that this is so[16]. This thesis *does not seek to question* graduate employability as a desirable aim for higher education, but, rather, *challenges the basis* on which this is seen to be achievable under the conventional model of learning and competence.

Both areas, higher education in relation to graduate employability and management education, training and employment, may be regarded as being concerned with *higher-level learning and competence*[17]. Not only is university-level education termed 'higher education', indicating its place in the levels of education, but also the occupations which are traditionally regarded as appropriate for graduates, and for which being a graduate is typically regarded

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16 This was clearly indicated by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, in his speech of 15th February 2000, at Greenwich University. It is also evident from Government actions, for example, replacement of student grants with loans repayable from future earnings, and the emphasis upon *employability* as a key measure of quality at institutional level (HEFCE, 1999).

17 'Higher-level' occupations also include the professions, both traditional (eg law and medicine) and those which have developed more recently. This thesis will not explicitly address the specific area of professional education, as there are wider issues with regard to the place of professions within society which are the subject of theorisation, research and debate within the sociology of the professions (see Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990, and Macdonald, 1995, for recent reviews).

as a pre-requisite, are located at the higher end of the occupational strata[18]. Not only is the management occupation similarly located in the occupational strata, but also management education and qualifications are typically provided through higher education, usually at postgraduate level. National Vocational Qualifications for first-line management are placed at level 4, which, within the national framework of qualifications, is regarded as equivalent to a higher education award (Middlemas and Sly, 1998; see table 1.3).

By focussing upon the processes of entry to and progression within such higher-level occupations, or educational-occupational trajectories, the thesis aims to open up a range of issues which remain largely unexamined under the conventional learning and competence model. Individuals seeking such occupational entry and progression are encouraged to follow the precepts of the conventional model, that is, to acquire, develop, and gain certification for the identified key skills and competencies, and to attend to their own individualised learning processes. In contrast to this, if, as will be argued, the conventional model has narrowed its focus, there may be a wider set of issues to which individuals should attend in order to achieve the key purpose of occupational entry and progression.

In addition, if institutions of higher education, and educational and training practitioners, focus on the narrow set of issues prescribed by the conventional model, they may thereby limit the potential role they may play in

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18 Of course, not all graduates gain what hitherto may have regarded as a 'graduate job', and the meaning of the latter is changing (Pearson et al., 1997).

enabling those who undertake their programmes of education and training to achieve the desired results. Conversely, by widening the range of issues to be addressed, institutions and practitioners may be more effective in such a role. Insofar as any policy is dependent for its effective implementation upon the various actors and agencies to perform their respective roles as prescribed, the problems that will be shown to accompany the narrow focus of the conventional model raise questions about aspects of current policy in the areas under study. By adopting the proposed wider framing of issues of learning and competence, policy may be developed in a manner which promotes a greater prospect of such actors and agencies being able to perform roles appropriate to the key purposes.

The context of the matters under investigation is that of significant developments in post-compulsory education and training in the UK, within the past two decades (see time-line in table 1.1). The 'New Training Initiative' (MSC, 1981a, 1981b; DE/DES, 1981) is generally taken as a key turning point in government policy in this area, leading to major initiatives such as the Youth Training Scheme and to the Review of Vocational Qualifications (De Ville, 1986). A number of key reports (eg Central Policy Review Staff,1980; Institute of Manpower Studies, 1984; Coopers and Lybrand, 1985) argued that the UK's economic competitive position was jeopardised by a continuing failure to invest in, and organise effectively, a vocational education and training system appropriate to the current and emerging economic and technological context. The proposals of the De Ville Working Party were

widely accepted, and from the late 1980s the new system of National Vocational Qualifications was introduced and developed, accompanied by other policies and initiatives presented as addressing the problems identified.

Whilst the major impact of such developments was on vocational education and training at 'lower' and 'intermediate' levels[19], the concerns identified and debates on how they should be addressed influenced debates on higher education and on management education, training and development. The Government's decision in 1986 to reverse of the 'capping' of places in higher education, leading to what is now a 'mass' higher education system[20], was made in the context of a wider set of initiatives arising from concerns about the perceived consequences for the economy of the lower levels of education and training of the UK workforce in comparison with those of competitor nations (Central Policy Review Staff, 1980; Institute of Manpower Studies, 1984; Coopers and Lybrand, 1985). The 1987 White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987) emphasised the need for higher education to take account of the economic requirements of the country.

Various financial and structural changes measures served to emphasise

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19 By 30th June 1997, just over 58 thousand NVQ certificates has been awarded at levels 4 and 5 together, out of a total of just over 1.6 million for all levels (less than 0.04%). In contrast, just under 1million NVQ certificates had been awarded at level 2 (source: QCA, 1997).

20 The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) showed the total number of full-time students in higher education as rising from about 400 thousand in 1968 to around 1 million in 1995; the participation rate (ie proportion of persons under 21 entering higher education) remained just below 15% in the early 1970s, dipping somewhat in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then rising rapidly and increasingly from 1987 to reach over 30% in 1995.

the role of higher education in respect of preparation for employment[21]. This was reinforced by the introduction in 1987 of the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative, funded through the Employment Department, whereby institutions could compete for extra finance (up to £1 million) on the basis of plans to engage in curriculum development oriented towards promoting the 'enterprise qualities' of students (MSC, 1987)[22]. Along with other developments, such as the Higher Education for Capability Initiative established by the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) (Stephenson, 1988), a variety of curriculum development projects at course, departmental and institutional levels were undertaken based on the notions of 'transferable skills', 'capabilities', 'personal competencies' and the like. Whilst differing in terminology and in the content of lists and frameworks (of 'skills' etc) produced and adopted, there was broad consensus on what may be termed the 'skills agenda' in higher education, at least amongst senior management and a significant number of staff involved in curriculum and educational development in higher education.

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21 For example, under the Educational Reform Act, 1988, the incorporation of the polytechnics and their removal from local education authority control, with the requirement for their governing bodies to include employers; the introduction in 1991of 'top up' loans for students whilst 'freezing' the maintenance grant.

22 £1 million over five years is, of course, a relatively marginal sum compared with the total public funding to institutions of higher education, which the Dearing Report shows as being over £4 billion (at 1995-6 prices) per year in the late 1980s. However, that there was considerable competition for Enterprise in Higher Education funding in each of the four years in which it was made available indicates not only that such marginal additional funding was seen as welcome but also that there was a high degree of agreement with the general aims of the initiative, amongst senior management of higher education institutions.

Table 1.3: Higher level qualifications and NVQ level equivalents

NVQ level 5

Higher degree; NVQ level 5

NVQ level 4

First degree; other degree level qualifications such as graduate membership of a professional institute; NVQ level 4; higher education below degree level; higher level BTEC or SCOTVEC; HNC or HND; RSA higher diploma; teaching qualifications; nursing qualifications.

Source: Middleton and Sly, 1998: 39

The field of management education, training and development was also the subject of considerable debate during this period. A series of three reports (Mangham and Silver, 1986; Handy et al.,1987; Constable and McCormick, 1987) were the trigger for a number of developments. The National Foundation for Management Education and Development (NFMED) was established, along with its executive arm, the Management Charter Initiative. NFMED was appointed by the Employment Department as the 'lead body' for establishing the occupational standards for management, on which would be based associated 'competence-based' National Vocational Qualifications for managers. The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) which validated what was then the main educational qualification for managers, the Diploma in Management Studies, undertook a review of that qualification, particularly seeking to address issues regarding 'management competence' (CNAA, 1990a). Many employing organisations were at the same time reviewing their own internal management training and development approaches, and developing their bespoke 'competency frameworks'[23]. The earlier work undertaken by McBer Associates in the USA for the American Management Association (Boyatzis, 1982), was regarded as of seminal influence. These various developments constituted what was termed 'the

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23 Examples of these will be presented in Chapter 2

competence movement' (Burgoyne, 1989)[24] in the management education, training and development field.

These parallel and broadly synchronous developments of notions 'competence' and 'transferable skills' (and cognates) and of their application in higher education and in management education, training and development set the context within which further developments took place over the following period. National Vocational Qualifications for management were introduced in 1991, and revised in 1997. The skills agenda was endorsed by the Dearing Committee in its report in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997), and by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) in a report it commissioned by consultants Coopers and Lybrand (CVCP, 1998).

These developments will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2, to elaborate the underlying model of competence and the assumptions on which it based. Such assumptions include the notion that competence is an *individual* attribute, the view that the relationship between competence and performance is one of *causation*, and that performance is *objectively observable*. Moreover, as will be shown, the initial emphasis upon competence was developed into a broader focus on the notion of learning, so that we may now speak of a 'learning and competence agenda', and of its underlying rationale as 'conventional model of learning and competence'. In brief, that model, it will be argued, is based on the assumption of learning as a process *sui generis*,

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24 The term 'competency movement' was already used in the USA context (Tuxworth, 1989)

which takes place *within* (internally) monadic *individuals*, and may be undertaken actively, ie as an *activity*.

Moreover, according to this model, this process results in (causes) *outcomes*, assumed to be unequivocal and discrete attributes of individuals, capable of inference from objectively observable and measurable behaviour or performance. By identifying the behaviour required in the occupational setting, it is assumed, the outcomes of educational and training programmes can be better tailored to promote the employability of students upon graduation and the competence of those seeking to become managers. Basing assessment on evidence of such performance allows for qualifications to provide transparent information to prospective employers to enable them to make recruitment decisions more effectively[25]. By understanding the learning process better, according to the conventional model, the achievement of such desired outcomes may be improved, particularly if the individuals themselves understand their own learning process and manage it for themselves.

The development of the learning and competence agenda has not been without debate, criticism and contestation, and the relevant literature on this will be examined in chapter 3. However, it will be shown that much of the critical literature has not addressed adequately certain underlying theoretical assumptions, and often may be taken as consonant with those assumptions. In

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25 The degree certificate merely showing subject(s) studied and degree classification is seen to provide insufficient information to prospective employers, and there are calls for its supplementation by a 'profile' or 'record of achievement' giving details, inter alia, of 'key skills' achieved (Fenwick et al., 1992; Assiter and Shaw, 1993; NCIHE, 1997; QAA, 1999b)

the absence of a clear and cogent critique of the underlying assumptions, debate on the learning and competence agenda has been limited. Much of the debate has been concerned with *which* skills and competencies are deemed to be appropriate and important, and *how* learning may be best facilitated. For many, the learning and competence agenda is 'common sense' (cf Jessup, 1991; Murphy and Otter, 1999).

1.4 Re-opening the debate

In seeking to re-open what has been a somewhat closed debate, we may refer to the purposes which the learning and competence agenda seeks to address. This is primarily that of the relationship between education and training and the employment arena. The theoretical task is to explain the nature of such relationship; the pedagogic task is to transform such theoretical understanding into educational and training practices which are likely to achieve social and economic desiderata; the policy task is to develop structures and systems which promote the likelihood that these will be achieved. Taken in these terms, we may note a number of issues which give rise to concerns over the conventional model.

As an attempted explanation of the relationship between education (and training) and the employment arena, the conventional model may be seen as an example of *psychologism*, ie explanation at an inappropriate individualistic level (cf Popper, 1962: 89ff). Sociological analyses of the role of credentials in the occupational order (Miller, 1967; Dore, 1976; Hirsch,

1977; Collins, 1979) show us that qualifications do *not* merely serve as objective statements of the abilities supposedly developed through education and training. Whilst 'de-schoolers' in the Illich (1971) tradition, and some humanist educators following Rogers (1969a) and Maslow (1971)[26] might argue for an education system free of the stultifying effects of qualifications, this is not part of the argument normally presented for the learning and competence agenda[27]; and is not part of the argument in this thesis. What is at issue is the validity of the conventional model, in respect of its assumptions about the role of credentials in processes by which individuals gain entry into post-graduation employment and/or managerial positions.

Furthermore, studies of the nature of education as 'cultural transmission', as examined particularly by Bernstein (1975) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) challenges the conventional model's assumption that explanation may be validly sought and made at the level of the individual. The analysis that the educational system is itself pervaded by processes of social division and stratification, in terms of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and modes of communication (Bernstein, 1975), raises significant questions for policies and practices premised on the understanding that the primary process is that of *individualised* learning, and that skills and

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26 Note Maslow's statement that '[i]n the ideal college, there would be no credits, no degrees, and no required courses. A person would learn what he wanted to learn' (Maslow, 1971: 175)

27 That is, the NVQ approach to competence is explicitly concerned with qualifications; similarly, the skills agenda in higher education seeks to reform the basis on which the degree qualification is awarded.

competencies may be objectively and transparently recognised in whoever possesses them. As Brown and Scase (1994) argue, under the emerging conditions in which work organisations are becoming increasingly 'adaptive', employers are likely to emphasise 'acceptability' in their selection processes. There is certainly clear evidence that the graduate labour market is highly stratified (Purcell and Hogarth, 1999; Berthoud, 1999; Pearson et al, 2000), particularly with regard to type of degree-awarding institution, social class origin, ethnicity, and age at graduation. Any valid explanation of the relationship between higher education and employment must therefore take account of the social processes within which recruitment takes place.

There has also been developments towards what may be seen more as a *social* theorisation of learning, notably situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Such an approach invites a reframing of learning in terms of *participation*, within 'communities of practice', rather than of *internalisation* (eg of knowledge or skill). The Lave and Wenger (1991) model of 'legitimate peripheral participation is based on a generalisation of forms of 'apprenticeship' or 'novitiateship', and seeks explicitly to examine the trajectories of the novice practitioner into a position of full-acceptance as a member of the relevant community of practice. Although the examples considered by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) mainly concerned with settings outside formal education, the key ideas suggest alternative modes of framing for the issues being examined in this

thesis. This thesis will develop such an alternative mode of framing in terms of notions of 'practices' and 'identity' which are also central to the approach of Lave and Wenger; however, the significance of these notions will be derived by means of a different mode of analysis from that adopted by Lave and Wenger[28].

Consideration of the biographical trajectories of individuals through the social arena of higher education into the social arena of employment may be related to Goffman's exploration of the 'moral career' of those who enter and pass through total institutions, such as mental hospitals (Goffman, 1959b, 1961). Although the education-employment relationship has an open structure and cannot be seen as a total institution in the sense used by Goffman, the general approach of his study is of value. Goffman invites us to consider the processes by which individuals come to be classified as mental patients, and their trajectories through the mental hospital system, not in psychiatric terms but sociologically. It is clear from the final section of Goffman's discussion of the 'moral career of the mental patient' that he seeks to draw general points about the relationship of the self to social arrangements:

> "Each moral career, and behind this, each self, occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment such as a mental hospital or *a complex of personal and professional relationships*. The self, then, can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members."

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28 Lave and Wenger primarily adopt an anthropological approach. The analysis in this thesis will be based on the philosophical (ie conceptual and logical) analysis of the nature of behaviour or performance, and an examination of the implications of this in social psychological and sociological terms.

(Goffman, 1961: 168: emphasis added)

If, then, we bracket questions regarding learning and skills as psychological explanations of the student-to-graduate-employee trajectory, we can begin to explore this in terms of what Goffman terms a 'moral career'. In this thesis, the concept of 'emergent identity' will be developed as a key sensitising concept (Denzin, 1978: 16; Strauss, 1997: 6) for exploration of the issues under study, consonant with Goffman's view of the 'self' indicated in the above quotation.

These considerations warrant more fundamental investigation of learning and competence than advocates of the learning and competence agenda would consider appropriate. This thesis seeks to engage in such fundamental investigation, and the outline of the analysis and argument will now be given.

1.5 Outline contents of the chapters of the thesis

Having introduced the main issues under investigation in this thesis, the next two chapters will, as indicated above, review the development of the learning and competence agenda (in Chapter 2) and main literature relevant to the debate on learning and competence (in Chapter 3), in respect of graduate employability and the occupation of management. Chapter 4 will describe, and present the rationale for, the research approach adopted for the empirical investigations in this thesis. Following this, the argument will proceed in two

stages, first the empirical critique of the conventional model of learning and competence, then the development and elaboration of the alternative 'relational' model.

Briefly, two lines of empirical enquiry will be pursued in the critique of the conventional model. Chapter 5 will present the analysis of interviews with individuals who are either 'novice managers' or graduates who have recently entered employment; the analysis will be concerned with the extent to which the conventional model adequately explains the experiences of such individuals in relation to their biographical and career trajectories. As the empirical evidence presented in chapter 5 could be challenged as unrepresentative, chapter 6 will examine the validity of the claims made for the conventional model of learning and competence using secondary evidence. It will be argued that the extant evidence does not support these claims. On the basis of the primary and secondary evidence, a reconsideration of the conventional model is therefore warranted, and this will form the basis of the rest of the thesis. This will be previewed below in order to indicate at this stage the main contours of the argument to be presented.

Central to the reframing and the overall argument of the thesis is that the term 'learning' is *systematically ambiguous*. The word is part of everyday, *mundane* talk, but also used within various other arenas. These include

psychological theory and research[29], the discourse of *pedagogic practice,* in discussions regarding *recruitment and employment decisions* in occupational settings, and in the development and presentation of *policy* with regard to education and employment. Taken as 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1953), we may say that the *meaning* of the term is to be found in relation to its use *within the particular language game*[30] not through appeal to some assumed common reference. The thesis will therefore, in chapter 7, engage in *conceptual analysis* of 'learning' and 'competence' (and cognate terms) in relation to the particular focus here, ie the relationship between (a) contexts where the 'learning process' is deemed to take place and (b) contexts in which its purported 'outcomes' are socially consequential.

Such analysis is necessary in order to ensure *ecological validity* (Usher and Bryant, 1989). Usher and Bryant, drawing upon Louch (1966), argue that scientific psychology tends to narrow the phenomena studied so that any theory has little explanatory value of outside the experimental setting, and little use in providing an account of 'real life' human action. Any relationship between the purported discoveries about human learning, as presented in psychological theories, and what takes place in educational settings, such that

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29 Moreover, 'learning' is conceptualised differently within *competing paradigms* within psychology, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

30 It is important to remember that Wittgenstein intends the term 'language game' to refer *not only* to utterances or writings, but to "the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which its is woven" (1953: 7); see also his later comment that "the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (op.cit.:23).

the term 'learning' may be applied with similar meaning in both cases, is primarily *conceptual rather than contingent*[31]. At the 'macro-level', where 'learning' is used as a synonym for 'education and training', the fact of differences in educational and training provision and achievement being associated with differences in economic performance cannot be then used to make valid arguments about the 'micro-level' of individual learning. We therefore must be clear to separate the different contexts in which the terms 'learning' and 'competence' are used as part the explanatory framework, to establish how these concepts are used within those different contexts and how, if at all, these different uses are related. Then, and only then, can any start be made on identifying any empirical associations between what occurs in the different contexts.

Having engaged in such conceptual clarification, the thesis will move on in chapter 8 to develop an alternative to the conventional model. In agreement with the conventional model, the thesis will argue that the notion of *performance*[32] is central to the relationship that is deemed to exist between learning and achievement of competence at one stage and the entry to and progression within the occupational arena. However, *contrary to* the

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31 That is, it must first be established that the *meaning* of 'learning' is the same in the separate contexts of psychological experimentation and of education *before* it may be claimed that the empirical findings in the former are applicable in the latter context.

32 An alternative term for competence-based education has been 'performance based education' (Tuxworth, 1989). As will be shown, the term 'performance' is widely used in texts on the NVQ approach to competence. Boyatzis' (1982) seminal book, 'The Competent manager' is subtitled 'A Model for Effective Performance'.

conventional model's understanding, it will be argued that performance is *not objectively observable*. Rather, drawing upon the movement-action-act distinction (Harré and Secord, 1972), it will be argued that the *perception* of performance involves *interpretation of situated activity*. The thesis will draw upon a number of theoretical approaches[33] in the social sciences which have similarities in their understanding and analysis of how micro-level, personal activity relates to the macro-level structural form of society, particularly through notions of interpretation, interaction and iteration, and the critical role of language in such processes. Using the term '***relational perspective***' (Gergen, 1994; Hosking et al., 1995; Hosking and Bouwen, 2000)[34] to indicate these similarities, a model of the requirements for the process of interpretation of situated activity as performance-of-a-kind will be developed. The two main elements will be identified as (a) the requirement for there to be some set of social practices such that the particular performance is taken to be an instantiation of a practice (or practices), and (b) the requirement that the person whose activity is under interpretation has appropriate identity for engaging in the performance.

These elements will be elaborated theoretically, particularly in chapter

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33 Principally, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, relational social constructionism.

34 The term 'relational perspective' has also been used by Prosser and Triggwell (Triggwell and Prosser, 1996; Prosser and Triggwell, 1998) to refer to the relationship between student learning and various influencing factors such as student backgrounds, their conceptions of learning, teacher practices and their conceptions of teaching. The term is used differently here, being linked with the 'relational theory' approach of Gergen (1994, 1995), Hosking et al. (1995) and Hosking and Bouwen (2000).

9 in respect of identity; it will be argued that this is best understood as iterative and interactional, whereby an individual's claim on an identity engages with processes of ascription by significant others. What is socially salient and consequential is neither *personal* identity nor *social* identity, but rather what will be termed the '***emergent identity***', which arises through the "internal-external dialectic of identification" (Jenkins, 1996). This will be examined in terms of Harré's (1983) concept of an *identity project*, which requires the individual at some stage to seek to *warrant* their *claim* on a particular identity, a position to which they aspire within a social arena, and which results in a response of affirmation or disaffirmation[35] (of the claim) by significant others, who thereby act as 'gatekeepers' to positioning within the social arena. Such affirmation or disaffirmation normally are legitimated through various forms of *warranting discourse* (Gergen, 1989). Successful outcome, in terms of affirmed claim, results in degrees of ***stabilisation*** of emergent identity. However, such a process of warranting, of claim and affirmation/ disaffirmation, is always open to contestation and iteration such that different ***modalities of emergent identity*** are possible. Biographical trajectories, careers, identity projects, may be seen as movements between such modalities of emergent identity.

This *relational perspective*, particularly the framework of modalities of emergent identity and the notion of warranting (of identity claims and

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35 In Goffman's terms, this involves 'hazard' within the 'moral career' (Goffman, 1961).

ascriptions) will then be deployed, in chapter 10, to re-examine the transcript material from the interviews with 'novice' managers and relatively new graduates, used previously to critique the conventional model. These will be reconsidered to examine how, in seeking to gain entry to, and progression within, occupational settings, these individuals may be seen to be attempting to move between modalities of emergent identity, and warrant their claims on the situated identities to which they aspired.

Based on such arguments and evidence, the nature of learning in the context of the concerns addressed here, ie in relation to trajectories through education and training contexts into particular types of social arenas[36], will be reframed. The thesis will conclude with consideration of further implications of this *relational perspective*, in terms of pedagogic practice and of education and training policy, and with regard to issues for further research.

Having outlined in this chapter the aims and focus of the thesis, and the context in which the issues have arisen, the next chapter will discuss the rise of the learning and competence agenda, and the assumptions upon which it is based.

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36 The main focus is on trajectories into and within employment. However, in respect of higher education, it will be necessary to consider another social arena entry to which may be warranted by claims associated with 'being a graduate', ie re-entry into academia in order to take advanced study, especially for a research degree. This will be termed the '*double warrant*'.

Chapter 2

The Learning and Competence Agenda:

Key Themes and Assumptions

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe and examine the key features of the rise of what we term here the 'learning and competence agenda' in respect of higher education and management education, training and development (METD), and seek to identify the key themes and underlying assumptions. The term 'agenda' is here used to refer to a set of proposed changes within the post-compulsory education and occupational training arena, which is based on a coherent combination of policy advocacy with practice advocacy[1], and the progressive implementation of such advocated policy and practice[2]. This chapter will first sketch the development of the learning and competence agenda to show how the terms 'learning', 'competence', 'competency' (plural 'competencies'), and 'skills' came to take their key position in policy and practice discourse. The chapter will then proceed to examine the meanings of these terms as used within the learning and competence agenda, and underlying assumptions of such meanings.

The chapter is ordered in this way in order to present the key aspects *both* of learning and of competence within the agenda, *before* discussing the assumptions on

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1 The term 'policy advocacy' is used here to refer to discourse addressing the direction that public policy *should* take, according to the actors and agencies involved.

2 This is not to claim that every particular proposal advocated is fully consistent with every other proposal, that all that has been advocated has been implemented, or that the the implementation of policy has been consistent. The main point being made here is that the notions of 'learning' and 'competence' may be seen as providing what is generally presented as the rationale for the policies and practices advocated and implemented.

which the agenda is based, *rather than* discussing in detail each aspect *separately*. By this it is intended to make clear the coherence of the learning *and* competence agenda. This will require what may appear, superficially, a degree of repetition in terms of the issues discussed; however, where this occurs, the intention is that the discussion takes the analysis further.

It is not the intention of this chapter, nor of the thesis, to engage in a detailed policy analysis of the learning and competence agenda. This has already been undertaken in respect of the development of vocational qualifications policy, for example by Gokulsing et al. (1996) and, more fully, by Raggatt and Williams (1999). Policy analysis in any field requires attending to both theoretical sophistication[3] and empirical validity, raising problems for maintaining coherence and explanatory power (Raggatt and Williams, 1999: 3); detailed policy analysis in respect of the learning and competence agenda lies outside the purpose and scope of this thesis. The task undertaken here is, rather, to seek to explore and examine the conceptual basis of the agenda, and of its theoretical assumptions, ie what is referred to in this thesis as the 'conventional model of learning and competence'.

Discussion of the literature within which the debate on the learning and competence agenda has been conducted will be undertaken in the next chapter; before examining that literature, it is necessary to be clear about the agenda itself. Later in the thesis, after considering empirical evidence in relation to the learning and competence agenda, we shall subject the conventional model to critique on the basis

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[3] See, eg., Ball's analysis of schooling policy development in respect of the introduction of the National Curriculum, where he draws upon an Althusserian framework of economic, political and ideological levels within a complex total social system (Ball, 1990)

of conceptual analysis (in chapter 7); it is necessary, therefore, to be clear about the conceptual and theoretical assumptions of the conventional model, the task to which we now move.

2.2 The rise of the learning and competence agenda

2.2.1 Two phases: competence and learning

The development of the learning and competence agenda may be seen as having arisen in two phases. The first phase, broadly from the early 1980s to the early-1990s, was when the notion of *competence* came to prominence, as indexed by the use of that and cognate terms. This phase has been well-documented (Burke, 1989; Silver, 1991; Jessup, 1991; Boam and Sparrow, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Hyland, 1994; Hodkinson and Issitt, 1995; Gosulking, 1996; Raggatt and Williams, 1999). The second phase was when the notion of *learning*, particularly as *distinguishable from education and/ or training* came to prominence; this became explicit mainly in the 1990s, but may be seen to have been implicit in much of the developments in which competence became a key notion. The *explicit* aspect of this phase, being relatively recent, has been less well-documented (see eg. Burke, 1995; Ranson, 1998a, 1998b). We shall examine the two phases in their chronological order, ie starting with competence.

2.2.2 The rise of 'competence' and the reform of vocational qualifications

The first phase in the rise of the agenda, in which the notion of competence came to prominence, began mainly in the early 1980s, although there were earlier

indications of the trend[4]. The late-1970s had been marked by rapidly increasing unemployment, particularly amongst school-leavers. Whilst various 'special measures' were taken by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), presented publicly as providing a remedy for a temporary problem[5], it was becoming clear that major structural changes were taking place, economically and technologically, with significant impact upon the labour market. In 1981, the MSC issued a consultative document on a 'New Training Initiative'(MSC 1981a), citing changes in the pattern and requirements of the labour market[6] as requiring urgent and radical changes to the training system, in order for industry and commerce, and the workforce, to be adequately equipped for the future. In discussing these changes, emphasis was placed on the need for the system to ensure that young people joining the labour market, and also adults, could demonstrate *competence*.

In the New Training Initiative document, the term 'competence' was used intermittently, with a fairly general meaning and with no specific definition provided; it is used to emphasise practical application of knowledge and skills. In 1984, the term gained greater prominence by its use in the title of a major report , 'Competence and Competition' (Institute of Manpower Studies, 1984), comparing the UK unfavourably

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4 Tuxworth (1989: 17) states that "there was patchy and desultory interest in CBET [competence based education and training] until the early 1980s"

5 Note, for example, the title of one scheme, 'Special Temporary Employment Programme' (STEP). The range of the various initiatives was referred to as 'Special Employment Measures' (SEMs).

6 Principally that blue collar jobs were being replaced by white-collar, jobs with limited skills were fast-disappearing, demand was increasing for technicians and technologists. The new technologies and markets demanded, according to the document, a more highly skilled, better educated and mobile workforce.

with competitor nations in respect of education and training arrangements. By 1986, the term had become central to the redefinition, made by the report of the Review of Vocational Qualifications, of what a vocational qualification ought to be, ie 'a statement of competence' (de Ville, 1986). In the ensuing implementation of the recommendations in that report, the term became more technically defined[7]. Subsequent development work within the two main agencies, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and the Standards Methodology Branch of the Employment Department[8], resulted in increased specification and stabilisation of definition. This process may be noted through the usage of the term in key documents (see table 2-1).

The significance of the introduction of 'competence' as a key term in the debates and policy developments may be seen as two-fold: (a) placing emphasis upon demonstrable *practical* ability, and (b) enabling a new way of organising vocational qualifications, particularly under a greater degree of centralised control. To some extent, the single term 'competence' may be viewed as incorporating the various forms of expressing the aims or objectives (ie intended outcomes) of the education and training which typically have been referred to as 'knowledge', 'skills', 'attitudes', or even by the more specialised terms 'cognitive', 'affective', 'psychomotor',

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7 As will be shown, the technical definition of competence and its specification for particular occupations was significant because of the emphasis placed on observation of performance. Moreover, the shift in the usage of 'competence' (and cognates) and 'learning' from *'untechnical concepts'* to *'technical concepts'* (Ryle, 1954) will be examined in respect of the conceptual confusion that has resulted.

8 Also called in some texts the 'Standards Methodology Unit'. This was a department originally within the Manpower Services Commission, then Training Agency followed by the Training, Enterprise and Education Directorate of the Employment Department, as the arrangements for implementation of training policy and strategy were re-organised.

'interpersonal'[9]. In that sense it provides for a smaller but more flexible vocabulary: no distinction need be made between what is knowledge, skill, and so on, with possible contestation over definition, when a single word serves for all practical educational and training purposes[10]. However, as the extracts shown in table 2-1 demonstrate, the term 'competence' also carries connotations of *relevance to*, and *practical application in*, the occupational setting. The traditional educational emphasis upon the development and assessment of knowledge and understanding was viewed as insufficient for contemporary industrial and commercial conditions, where workplace performance by employees would be a major determinant both of individual success in gaining and keeping employment and of organisations, and of the country, to maintain a competitive position. Such connotations of practical performance are also carried by the terms 'capability', 'transferable skills, and 'key skills', which became the favoured alternative terms (particularly 'key skills') in higher education, as will be discussed below, in section 2.2.4.

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9 The work of Bloom et al. (1956) and Krathwohl et al. (1964) was seminal in the adoption of the terms 'cognitive' and 'affective' in descriptions of educational objectives. Their three-fold classification of 'domains' included psychomotor (ie perceptual and physical abilities), but they did not explore this domain, arguing that it was not of major significance in *education*. The 'interpersonal' has come into use mostly over the past three decades, and covers much that Bloom and Krathwohl assign to the affective domain.

10 Silver suggests that 'competence' was being developed as "an umbrella concept to incorporate skills and attitudes, knowledge and experience" (Silver, 1991: 73)

Table 2-1: The developing use of the term 'competence'

1981: A New Training Initiative: A Consultative Document (MSC, 1981a)
[note: this document is generally taken to have initiated the major direction taken by vocational education and training policy over the past two decades]

para. 26.4 "the arrangements agreed [for 'standards of skill' in training for young people] need to recognise that different individuals have different learning speeds and that *what matters is that an individual can demonstrate the necessary competence.*"

para. 28 "When academic knowledge is involved, it is familiarity - *and some competence in - the practical applications of that knowledge* that employers seek."

para.32 "Growing numbers of those [adults] with *competences* which have become outdated or rusty through lack of practice are seeking retraining or refresher courses."

para 34.2 [the objectives offer advantages to employees and their unions but] "at the same time they require removal of outdated barriers, particularly in key areas of skill training, and access to jobs for all who can *demonstrate agreed standards of competence."*

1984 Competence and Competition (NEDO, 1984)
[note: this document drew attention to significantly lower levels of education and training for British employees in comparison with those in competitor countries]

para. 1.62 "the sharp decline in apprenticeship opens the door to less tradition-bound ways of recognising, assessing and accrediting *competences. This new emphasis upon competence, and not only on knowledge and skills,* will not be easy to achieve."

1986 Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales (de Ville, 1986)
[note: this report led the Government the establishment of the system of National Vocational Qualifications]

para. 4.3 "A vocational qualification is a *statement of competence* clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment, further education and training, issued by a recognised body to an individual. This *statement of competence* should incorporate the assessment of:

- skills to specified standards;"
- relevant knowledge and understanding;
- the ability to use skills and to apply knowledge and understanding to the performance of relevant tasks."

Appendix 6 (Glossary of Education and Training Terms as used in the Report)
"*Competence*: the ability to perform a particular activity to a prescribed standard."
"Skill: facility gained through practice or knowledge"
[NB no entry for 'knowledge' or 'understanding']

1991 Criteria for National Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ, 1991)
[note: this document set out the procedures and regulations for accreditation of NVQs]

section 2 "The NVQ *statement of competence*, which is the authoritative statement of the national standard of performance, must have the following components:

2.1 NVQ title [...] which denotes the *area of competence* [...]
2.2 *units of competence* are the main sub-divisions of an NVQ and consist of a coherent group of elements of competence [...]
2.3 *elements of competence* are the sub-divisions of units and reflect those things a person should be able to do at work."

(NB emphasis added in all cases)

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the term 'competence' provided the basis for changing the vocational education system through the reformation of vocational qualifications. The National Council for Vocation Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Employment Department's Standards Methodology Branch adopted a specific approach for the specification of what were intended to be the competence-based qualifications called for by the De Ville Working Party. As the final quotation in table 2-1 indicates, an NVQ as a 'statement of competence' based on a 'national standard of performance' for the 'area of competence'. Any awarding body seeking accreditation ('hallmarking') of any of its qualifications as a new-style National Vocational Qualification would be subject to the criteria, and to the interpretation and application of such criteria, set by NCVQ in partnership with the Standards Methodology Branch. In the apparent absence of qualifications then-currently existing that met NCVQ criteria and could serve as models for more general reform[11], NCVQ and the Standards Methodology Branch developed a method, referred to as 'functional analysis', which would be adopted for analysing any occupation in order to specify 'standards of competence' in that occupation. The *term* 'competence' within the reform of vocational qualifications thus came to have a specific and *technically specified meaning*. This will be discussed below, as the ***'standards approach'*** to competence.

2.2.3 The management competence movement

Outside of developments in the field of vocational qualifications, the terms

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11 See Raggatt and Williams, 1999: 68ff.

'competence' or 'competency'[12] had already begun to be used, particularly in management education, training and development in the UK. A seminal influence was the empirical work, by McBer and Company in the USA, to identify a generic set of 'competencies' that are critical for effective managerial performance (Boyatzis, 1982). A number of companies in the UK attempted to develop their own frameworks of competencies (Cockerill, 1989; Glaze, 1989; Greatrex and Phillips, 1989; Jackson, 1989; Jacobs, 1989; Devine, 1990; O'Neill, 1990; Silver, 1991; Boam and Sparrow, 1992 Woodruffe, 1992; Matthewman, 1995). The Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) each initiated reviews of the management education programmes which they validated[13], addressing a number of issues, particularly the growing emphasis upon managerial competence (Training Agency/ BTEC, 1989; CNAA, 1990a; CNAA/ BTEC, 1990a, 1990b). CNAA issued revised guidelines for the Diploma in Management Studies, which emphasised the need for competence to be assessed (CNAA, 1990b, 1990c). Whilst BTEC decided to transform its own management education programme (Certificate in Management Studies) into an NVQ at level 4 (BTEC, 1991), the

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12 Whether there is a difference of meaning between the differently-spelt terms, 'competence' and 'competency' (plural, 'competencies), and if so what, has been raised by a number of writers. The convention here is to adopt 'competence' as the term used for the overall attribution to a person as *being competent*, and to use 'competency' as a count-noun (plural 'competencies'), as in a person *having this or that competence* (cf Short, 1984b; Collin, 1989). However, in direct quotations the author's original usage will be maintained.

13 That is, the Certificate in Management Studies (BTEC) and the Diploma in Management Studies (CNAA). The Diploma (DMS) was then the 'largest single part-time management education programme' (CNAA, 1990a: 11), though subject to increasing competition from the expanding number of MBA (Master in Business Administration) programmes being offered. BTEC's Certificate in Management Studies was later replaced by the Certificate in Management as a level 4 NVQ, accredited as meeting the occupational standards set by MCI (BTEC, 1991).

different role of CNAA with regard to institutions of higher education gave the latter greater autonomy in how they defined competence. The *meaning* of 'competence' adopted by such institutions was, for the most part, more in line with that presented by Boyatzis (1982) and the bespoke frameworks developed by various employing organisations. It retains the connotations of relevance and practical application but, unlike the case of NVQs, there is no single agreed framework or method for achieving such a framework. This approach to competence will be discussed below as the '***competency analysis approach***'.

2.2.4 The skills agenda in higher education

The 'skills agenda' in higher education (Fallows and Steven, 2000) can be seen to be more comparable with the 'competency analysis' approach referred to above, than with the 'standards approach' to competence developed within the NVQ system. Although there have been attempts to introduce NVQs into higher education, these have met with limited success (Otter, 1992; HEQC, 1995). A major reason for this is the occupational specificity of competence within the NVQ system; this is deemed inappropriate to higher education, given that most subjects taught at university are not directly vocational in nature, and even students taking vocationally-related courses often do not enter a career directly related to their degree subject. However, the general connotations of the notion of competence, in terms of occupational relevance and practical ability, have been addressed through the notion of 'skills'. In that sense, we may view the skills agenda in higher education as part of the broader competence agenda (Barnett, 1994).

This emphasis upon 'skills' in higher education can be dated back mainly to the statement on 'Higher Education and the Needs of Society', jointly published by the National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education and the University Grants Committee (NAB/ UGC, 1984)[14]. Referring to the first of the four objectives for higher education, as stated in the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), 'instruction in skills', the NAB/ UGC statement drew attention to the rapidity at which specific knowledge becomes outdated in the modern world, and the speed of change in the contexts of the application of such knowledge. The statement then asserted that

> "The abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life as well as in public and social administration are the *transferable intellectual and personal skills*. These include the ability to analyse complex issues, to identify the core of a problem and the means of solving it, to synthesise and integrate disparate elements, to clarify values, to make effective use of numerical and other information, to work co-operatively and constructively with others, and, above all perhaps, to communicate clearly both orally and in writing. A higher education system which provides its students with these skills is serving society well."
> (NAB/ UGC, 1984: 4; emphasis added)

Various initiatives since the mid-1980s have been concerned with the development of 'skills', the actual terms varying between projects. Typically, a term such as 'personal', 'transferable', 'generic', 'core', or 'key' is linked with 'skills', 'capabilities', or 'competencies' (Assiter, 1995; Drew, 1998; Bennett, et al., 2000;

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[14] The Robbins Report did refer to 'instruction in skills', but did not elaborate the nature of skills; the emphasis was mainly on reminding readers that higher education has a role with regard to the employment arena (Robbins, 1963: 6). Using the publication of the NAB/UGC joint statement as the 'date of origin' of the skills agenda is warranted by the fact that skills terminology is absent from the study of employers' expectations of higher education by Roizen and Jepson (1985), particularly in chapter 3, subtitled 'A Degree and What Else?' (ie precisely where one would expect to find a discussion of transferable skills, if the term were in common currency).

Fallows and Steven, 2000); sometimes 'qualities' is used in addition to or instead of one of the latter terms. Employment Department funding of the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative was a key factor in the promotion of many such projects (Drew, 1998; Bennett, et al., 2000), and more generally is credited with 'changing the mindset' in institutions so that employability is now regarded as a legitimate aim for higher education (Burniston, et al., 1999). Further funding, after the end of the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative, has been made available through the Higher Education Quality and Employability Division of the Department for Education and Employment.

In terms of policy advocacy, the RSA's Higher Education for Capability initiative played an influential role (Stephenson and Weil, 1992), as did a key report by the Association of Graduate Recruiters, which adopted the term 'self-reliance skills' which was presented as a set of twelve 'career management and effective learning skills' (Association of Graduate Recruiters,1995). The Dearing Committee (NCIHE, 1997) used the term 'key skills', listing four[15] that were deemed to be most important, and this term is increasingly being used in policy discourse particularly through documents published by the funding councils and the Quality Assurance Agency. Finally, in terms of key elements in the development of the skills agenda, we may note the report by consultants PriceWaterhouse Coopers commissioned jointly by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), concerned with what it termed 'employability

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15 The key skills referred to by the Dearing Report were 'communication skills', 'numeracy', 'the use of information technology', and 'learning how to learn' (NCIHE, 1997: 9.17)

skills' (CVCP, 1998)[16].

These various initiatives have generated a wide range of approaches to 'skills development' within institutions of higher education, at course, departmental, faculty and institutional levels. Whilst there has been dissemination of specific individual approaches[17], there have also been edited collections presenting such case studies within a wider argument in favour of a generalisable skills agenda (Dunne, 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000). The University of Nottingham was funded by the Department for Education and Employment, from 1997, to develop a website for dissemination of information on key skills development in higher education; case studies of projects in 39 institutions are presented on the website[18]. It would appear that the diversity of approaches is not viewed as a problem for the validity of the skills agenda, but rather as confirming it legitimacy.

From the above sketch, we may note the increasing emphasis upon competence in both the management education, training and development field and higher education, particularly in respect of graduate employability. In the former, the 'competence movement' (Burgoyne, 1993) has taken two forms, the competency analysis approach and the standards approach. In higher education, although the term 'competence' is sometimes used, the most common term is 'skills' with some

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16 Dunne comments that the CVCP report (CVCP, 1998) "shows how far the emphasis in the UK has gone. It seems that *all* skills learnt in university are now termed 'employability skills' ..." (Dunne, 1999: 198; emphasis in original).

17 Mostly through conference presentations and published articles. In general, these tend to be presented as 'case studies', and their generalisability is questionable.

18 Website URL: http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk - accessed 20th April 2000, last updated 1st January 2000

adjective indicating their presumed transferability and generic nature. In the next section, we shall examine these further to clarify the assumptions on which they are based.

2.2.5 The rise of 'learning'

The emphasis upon the notion of '*learning*', in terms of education and training policy, as indexed by the primacy given to that term, is relatively recent; it may be seen as becoming evident in the second phase of the rise of the agenda. The White Paper (DE/ DES, 1986) announcing the Government's intentions, following the De Ville report on the Review of Vocational Qualifications (De Ville, 1986), used the phrase 'education and training' in its title[19]. Although the fourth paragraph refers to the importance of people acquiring "the desire to learn, the habit of learning, and the skills that learning brings", this is followed in the second sentence immediately following, by the assertion that all must recognise the importance of investing in *training* (DE/ DES, 1986: 1). A further White Paper five years later was titled 'Education and Training for the 21st Century' (DES/ DE, 1991). It was not until 1996 that the term 'learning' appeared in the *title* of a relevant Government publication (DfEE, 1996). After the 1997 General Election, the term 'learning' came to be used much more in Government publications. In 1998, the consultation paper 'The Learning Age' was published and National Education and Training Targets were renamed as 'National Learning Targets', followed in 1999 by the White Paper

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19 'Working Together: Education and Training' (DE & DES, 1986)

'Learning for Success' (DfEE, 1999). The Government plans to introduce in 2001 a National Learning and Skills Council for England, with regional Learning and Skills Councils taking on most of the work of the Training and Enterprise Councils.

'Lifelong learning' and 'learning society' are now established vocabulary items for statements of Government policy.

The increasing use of the term 'learning' may also be seen as resulting from policy *advocacy*. There has for a long time been provision of education and some forms of training, particularly for professions such as accountancy and the law, outside of formal educational or training *establishments*, for which the usual terms were 'correspondence course' and 'distance education'. In 1982, MSC established, under the provisions of the New Training Initiative, the 'Open Tech'[20] programme for the development of approaches to training based on 'distance *learning*' (MSC, 1981b: 52); in the earlier consultative document, the term used had been 'open *learning*' (MSC, 1981a: 57). The White Paper used both phrases but, interestingly, referred to these as 'methods'[21]. Whilst the use of the term 'open' may be subject to considerable critique (see, eg., Hodgson et al, 1987), our interest here is more with the use of the term 'learning'.

The Royal Society of Arts has promoted the notions of lifelong learning and the learning society since the early 1990s (Ball, 1992), and established the Campaign for Learning in 1995 (Maxted, 1996). The National Commission on Education

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20 The term 'Open Tech' was coined as a deliberate analogue with the name 'Open University'

21 The Consultative Document merely talked about the "increasing opportunities for 'open learning' to improve access" (MSC, 1981a: 57) whilst the Agenda for Action referred to "the Open Tech' approach to distance learning" (MSC, 1981b: 52)

published its report in 1993 as *'Learning Succeeds'* (National Commission on Education, 1993), the Economic and Social Research Council announced a major research initiative in 1994 on the learning society, and 1996 was the European Union's Year of Lifelong Learning. The title of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) was *'Higher education in the learning society'*. In various forums of policy advocacy, the term 'learning' has become commonplace.

In much of such usage, the term 'learning' seems to serve mainly as a one word substitute for 'education and training'. Traditionally viewed, and institutionally structured, as distinct and separate areas of public policy, the two areas of education and of training have increasingly been combined (eg DE/ DES, 1986; DES/DE, 1991), with the Employment Department[22] taking on increasingly involvement in and funding for vocationally-oriented areas of education. In 1995 the two hitherto separate government departments were merged[23]. In this context, 'learning', taken as a term which encompasses the purpose of *both* education and training, serves conveniently to refer to both, particularly when combined with the term 'lifelong'. It would indeed be difficult to think of a phrase in place of 'learning society' which includes the phrase

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22 Governmental responsibility for employment affairs was subject to various institutional changes over this period. Much of the policy formulation and policy implementation was devolved to the Manpower Services Commission until its abolition in 1988, when training affairs came under the Training Agency. This was later re-absorbed into the Employment Department, as the Training, Enterprise and Education Directorate until the Department was merged with the Department for Education to form the Department for Education and Employment. For simplicity, unless there are significant reasons for distinguishing between the various department, directorates and agencies, the term 'Employment Department' will be used when referring to the government agency concerned with employment affairs before the merger with the Department for Education.

23 As were the two separate agencies concerned with qualifications, ie for initial education (Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority) and for vocational qualifications (National Council for Vocational Qualifications), merged into the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

'education and training' without being cumbersome. Although the National Targets for Education and Training were renamed the 'National Learning Targets', they are mainly concerned with targets for achievement of educational and training qualifications; even the target for adult participation in learning is expressed solely in terms of engagement in formal education and training. So the increased usage of the term 'learning' in policy discourse may possibly taken as indexing nothing more significant than convenience of expression.

However, we can note two key developments in policy discourse, in which the term 'learning' is significant. First, as indicated earlier in this section the shift to 'learning' from 'education' and/or 'training' was implicit in the developing emphasis upon competence. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) explicitly stated that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) should be independent of 'the mode of learning' (NCVQ, 1991: 5). That is, NVQs were to be devised in such a way that an individual could seek assessment without having undertaken any *specific* programme, or *even any programme* of formal education or training. This was termed 'accreditation of prior *learning*' (APL) or 'accreditation of prior *experiential learning*' (APEL)[24] (Simosko, 1990; Newman and Llewellin, 1990; Evans, 1994). This significant change in the manner by which individuals could gain access to qualifications linked with the developing notion of the 'learning process' and particularly with that of 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 1984; Weil and McGill,1989).

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[24] Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is the general term, and such 'prior learning' may include formal education and training, which may or may not be *certificated*. It may also include learning which has taken place outside of the context of formal education, training and certification, or 'experientially'; hence the term 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning' (APEL).

Secondly, there has been an increasing reference to 'outcomes' as a broader term than 'competence', covering forms of education and training which are not exclusively 'competency-based' (Burke,1995: 3). Burke (op.cit.) credits this change of terminology to Gilbert Jessup, a major figure in the development of the vocational qualifications system over this period[25]. Jessup had previously presented the term in his book of the same title (Jessup, 1991), which Burke (op.cit.) views as "the single most *efficient cause* contributing to this new emphasis" on outcomes. Burke continues that

> "The notion that Outcomes may now be seen as the linchpin of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and, increasingly, a focus for discussion in HE and the professions."
> (Burke, 1995: 4)

Whilst the term 'outcomes' may be viewed as synonymous with 'objectives', as used in descriptions of the intended goals of programmes of education and/ or training, particularly in the form of 'behavioural objectives' (Tyler, 1949; Mager, 1962; Popham, 1969), the term 'learning outcomes' extended its application to cover *all* forms of learning, including that which takes place outside of formal education and/ or training contexts. The term 'learning outcomes' began to be used in *higher education* policy discourse from about 1992 (Otter, 1992), and is now recommended by the Quality Assurance Agency as a key element in the specification of programmes (NCIHE, 1997; QAA, 2000: 24).

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25 Jessup was initially Director of Research, Development and Information at NCVQ, later becoming additionally Deputy Chief Executive. See 'Notes on Contributors', in Burke (1995: 324) for a description of his 'central role in the development and implementation of outcome-based qualifications'.

2.2.6 Summary: the rise of the learning and competence agenda

To summarise the main points in this section, we may note the central place of the terms 'competence' and 'learning' in post-compulsory education and training over the past two decades. In the wake of the Handy (1997) and Constable and McCormick (1997) reports, new qualifications for managers were established within the competence-based NVQ system, adopting a 'standards' approach to competence. In the management education, training and development field more widely, the seminal work of Boyatzis (1982) has given rise to a wide variety of 'competency' frameworks. This is reflected in the skills agenda in higher education, with various models and frameworks of 'transferable skills' or 'key skills' (or other cognates) being developed. The rise to prominence of the notion of 'competence' has been latterly followed by a growing emphasis upon the notion of 'learning'; this subsumes, to some extent, the notion of 'competence' as an *outcome* of a learning *process*.

We shall now examine in more detail the meaning of the key terms 'competence', 'competency', 'skills' and 'learning', to elicit the key assumptions on which the learning and competence agenda is based.

2.3 Competency, competence and skills: examining meanings and assumptions

This section is concerned with further consideration of the three approaches to competence as identified in section 2.2, ie competency analysis, the standards approach, and transferable skills, in order to clarify further the understanding of the nature of competence within each. As will be shown, a set of assumptions are implicit,

and sometimes explicit, in the different approaches, in particular:

1. that competence is some form of *individual* attribute (assumption of individualism);
2. that there is a *causal* relationship between competence and performance (assumption of causality);
3. that performance may be *objectively observed and assessed* (assumption of objective observability of performance);
4. that future performance may be *predicted* on the basis of the identification of competence (assumption of predictability).

These assumptions may be viewed as forming the key elements of what is referred to in this thesis as the 'conventional learning and competence model'. The learning-related assumptions of the model will be considered later in this chapter.

2.3.1 Competency analysis

As indicated in the preceding section, the approach to competency analysis developed by McBer and Company, as popularised by Boyatzis (1982), was seminal in the rise of the management competence movement. The McBer approach described by Boyatzis is the outcome of the aggregation of various separate studies, with the American Management Association funding the aggregate analysis (Boyatzis, 1982: vii). Those studies were concerned to identify what were the factors which give rise to effective managerial performance, particularly those factors which may be deemed to be attributes or characteristics of the individual manager (assumption of individualism). A model of effective performance is presented by Boyatzis (op.cit., 13), in which what he terms 'the individual's competencies' form one of a set of three

'critical components' which must all 'fit' together for behaviour to be effective (figure 2-1). Boyatzis adopts from Klemp (1980) the definition of a 'job competency' as "an underlying characteristic of a person which *results in* effective and/or superior performance in a job" (Boyatzis, 1982: 21; emphasis added). This is then glossed:

> "A job competency is *an underlying characteristic of a person* in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses."
> (ibid.; emphasis in original)

Such characteristics are "*causally* related to effective and/or superior performance in a job" (op.cit.: 23; emphasis added) (assumption of causality)[26].

We may also note that the understanding of causality adopted is Humean, ie of constant regularity. The method adopted for identifying job competencies complies with what may be termed the positivist tradition in scientific methodology to generate "probabilistic generalizations of ... patterns [of sensations]" (Harré, 1981: 3); it is representative of conventionally accepted good practice in psychometric (non-experimental) psychological research (Cronbach, 1957)[27]. The process by which the competencies are identified is presented in five steps:

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26 Spencer, who succeeded Boyatzis as President and Chief Executive Officer of McBer, is even more explicit: "A competency is an *underying characteristic* of an individual that is *causally related* to *criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance* in a job or situation." (Spencer and Spencer, 1993: 9; emphasis in original)

27 Robertson et al (1999) present a recent example of such research, using a range of personality tests and other psychometric methods to establish what they claim are the 'personal, psychological attributes associated with managerial behaviour' (p. 5)

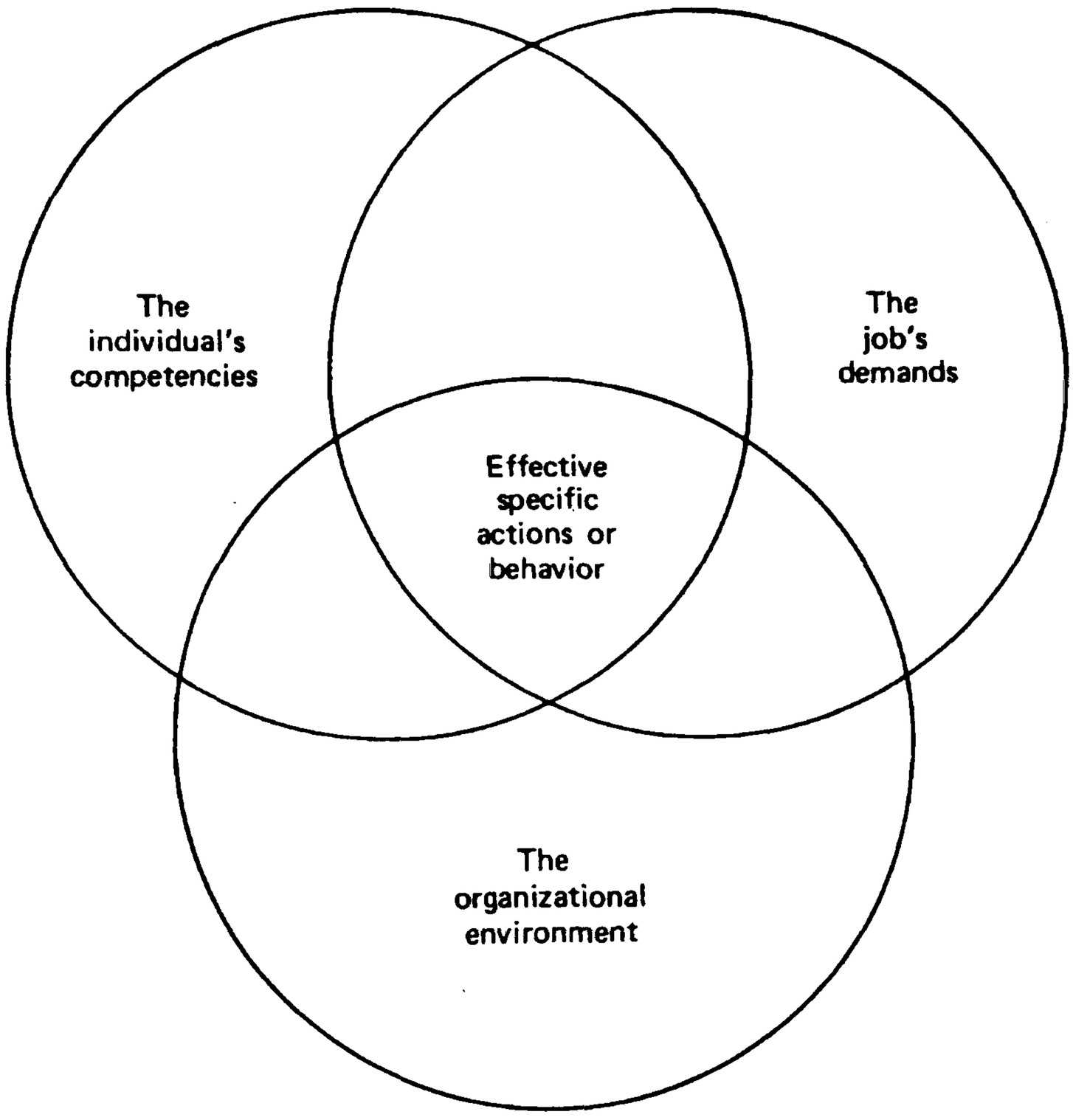

Figure 2.1 Boyatzis' Model of Effective Job Performance (Boyatzis, 1982: 13)

1. identification of criterion measure: determining the appropriate measure of job performance[28];

2. job element analysis: producing a weighted list of characteristics that managers perceive as important in distinguishing between superior and average performers, and those which are required by anyone in the job;

3. behavioural event interviewing: a form of critical incident interviewing with managers, asking them to recall three situations in which they had felt they had been effective in the job, and three situations in which they felt they had been ineffective, and to discuss their thoughts and feelings;

4. the administration of tests and other measures to assess the competencies established through steps 2 and 3;

5. integration of steps 2 to 4 into a competency model (Boyatzis, 1982: 42).

The approach involves the use of statistical techniques for analysis, which Boyatzis discusses (pp. 56-59); 21 tables of statistical analyses are presented as appendices. From such analysis, a set of competencies is generated, the existence of which (in an individual, as identified by means of the 'tests and other measures') enables predictions to be made about future performance [assumption of predictability][29].

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[28] ie assumption of objective observability of performance.

[29] Spencer and Spencer (1993: 9) state that "*Causally related* means that a competency *causes* or *predicts* behavior and performance". This accords with the Humean version of causality.

This approach has been emulated, whether directly or co-incidentally, within the UK, principally within employing organisations (see table 2.2 for examples)[30]. However, the extent to which the various models have been subject to the rigorous empirical methodology which Boyatzis describes is uncertain as little information is given on this. What the models appear to have in common is the assumption that there are certain identifiable attributes or characteristics of an *individual* which are *causally* related to what would be rated (*objectively observed and assessed*) as competent managerial performance. Their use in recruitment and promotion processes is based on the assumption that they have *predictive* validity.

2.3.2 Competency and the skills agenda in higher education

Turning now to the skills agenda in higher education, it is fairly apparent that it is similar to the *competency analysis* in respect of the type of items presented as 'skills'. Illustrative examples of the frameworks of skills within various universities are shown in table 2.3, along with the 'key skills' referred to by the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Analysis of a fuller set of case studies, as presented on the Government-funded dissemination website, will be presented in chapter 6.

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30 See also Dulewicz and Herbert (1999) and Robertson et al. (1999) for more generic approaches.

Table 2.2 Examples of in-company, bespoke competency frameworks

Company :	Cadbury Schweppes	W H Smith	BP	Manchester Airport	National Westminster
	Strategy	Written communication	Personal drive	Critical reasoning	Information search
	Drive	Oral communication	Organizational drive	Strategic visioning	Concept formation
	Relationships	Leadership	Impact	Business know-how	Conceptual flexibility
	Persuasion	Team membership	Commun-ication	Achievement drive	Interpersonal search
	Leadership	Planning and organizing skills	Awareness of others	Proactivity	Managing interaction
	Followership	Decision making	Team management	Confidence	Develop-mental orientation
	Analysis	Motivation	Persuasiveness	Control	Impact
	Implement-ation	Personal strength	Analytical power	Flexibility	Achievement orientation
	Personal factors	Analytical reasoning skills	Strategic thinking	Concern for effectiveness	Self-confidence
			Commercial judgement	Direction	Presentation
			Adaptive orientation	Motivation	Proactive orientation
				Interpersonal skills	
				Concern for impact	
				Persuasion	
				Influence	

source: Woodruffe, 1992: 23

Various other attempts have been made to identify such purported characteristics and attributes, deemed to be capable of development (NAB, 1986; Smith et al., 1989; Harvey, 1992; Allen, 1993; Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995; CVCP, 1998). In none of this literature is there any *specific* discussion of the nature of such skills or competences except in relation to the notion of them being 'generic', 'transferable' and so on[31]. However, the context in which the terms are used indicates that the assumption is that of some attribute or characteristic of an *individual*, possession of which tends to result in (*cause*) effective performance in various situations (eg during a course of study, whilst being considered for employment, and when employed as a graduate).

Moreover, such attributes or characteristics, it is assumed, may be *assessed* whilst a student is undertaking their course in higher education and the information from such assessment detailed in some form of 'profile' or 'record of achievement'; employers may then base their (predictive) recruitment decisions, at least in part, on the information so provided[32]. The assumptions thus may be taken as largely consonant with those we have noted above as characterising the notion of competency analysis in the mode of Boyatzis[33].

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31 See also Fallows and Steven (2000) who *promise* to address the question 'what is meant by the general term "skills"?', but then merely distinguish different phrases which include the term (ie 'transferable skills', 'key skills', 'common skills', 'core skills') (Fallows and Steven, 2000: 7ff).

32 Employers of graduates often may use assessment centres in their recruitment and selection processes. The assumption of the skills agenda is that the skills developed by the student/ graduate will be exhibited in their behaviour in such a context.

33 Although none of the cases of key skills in the UK appear, from any published literature, to have been based on the type of research which underpins the McBer/ Boyatzis model.

Source	Skills
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report)	communication skills, numeracy, the use of information technology, learning how to learn
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem solving
Bangor (University of Wales, Bangor)	communicating, analytical thinking interpersonal skills, managerial skills, maths and information technology, creativity, enquiry and research
Huddersfield, & Lincolnshire and Humberside Universities	communication, application of number, IT, problem solving, working with others, improving own performance
Luton University	information retrieval and handling, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving, social development and interaction
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	managing and applying intellect, self management, working with others, effective communication, information technology, use and application of mathematics
Sheffield University	communication, teamwork, problem solving, managing and organising
Teeside University	use of IT, research skills, critical thinking, problem solving, information gathering, decision making, communication/ presentation, public speaking, group skills, negotiating, influencing, persuading, interviewing, consulting, leading discussions, intellectual skills
Wolverhampton University	communicate effectively, organise, gather information, use IT, act independently, work in teams, numeracy

Table 2.3 Examples of skills frameworks

source: Key Skill Dissemination Project, Nottingham University
(from website: http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk - accessed 20 April 2000)

However, we should note that these lists and frameworks of skills, as far as can be determined, are *not* based on the empirical methods adopted within the research described by Boyatzis. Typically, they appear to be based on *ad hoc* collations of skills terms, sometimes derived by 'working parties' through what may be referred to as 'brainstorming'[34] activities. Moreover, the skills lists produced are usually presented as being *additional to* or *complementing* the subject-specific knowledge and skills deemed to be appropriate to the award of a degree in a named subject field[35]. Yet no empirical research has been undertaken to ascertain the relationship between degree classification (as a measure of subject knowledge and skills) and the possession of key/ transferable skills in respect of success or otherwise in job search. Overall, the causal assumptions of the skills agenda in higher education appear to be based on little more than 'common sense' (Murphy and Otter, 1999).

Having considered the assumptions of the competency analysis approach, within which we may subsume the skills approach, we may now consider the different approach adopted in the development of National Vocational Qualifications, particularly for the occupation of management.

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34 Although not following the strict prescription of the brainstorming method, such sessions typically abide by the rule forbidding criticism or evaluation of contributions by members of the group. Whilst brainstorming is undoubtedly a well-documented method for creative problem solving, its appropriateness in the analysis of 'key skills' is dubious.

35 This has given rise to debates over how such skills should fit into the curriculum, particularly whether they should be *addition to* ('bolt on') or an *integral part of* ('embedded') the modes of course delivery and assessment (CVCP, 1998)

2.3.3 The 'standards' approach: management NVQs

The MCI was established just as the new National Vocational Qualifications system was being put in place, and so became the 'lead body' for the occupation of management[36], responsible for developing what were termed the 'occupational standards' on which National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) for management may be based. In becoming involved with the development of NVQs, MCI was required to adopt the particular approach to competence analysis which had by then been established as the method to be used nationally within what was termed the 'standards development programme'. This approach to competence will now be examined, with particular reference to management.

It is important to note that the standards development programme was specifically concerned with *national certification*, that is, with the project initiated by the Review of Vocational Qualifications Report (de Ville, 1986) to rationalise vocational qualifications under a national system. The Report had stated that a vocational qualification should be 'a statement of competence'; the term 'National Vocational Qualification' was to be a 'hallmark' to indicate that, whichever awarding body issued it, its award was in accord with nationally prescribed *standards for assessment.* An NVQ in a particular occupation (eg management) would thus, purportedly, be an indication that the person to whom it had been awarded had been judged *to be competent in that* occupation (eg to be a competent manager). The task which was set for the agencies charged with implementing the Report's

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36 Formally, the National Forum for Management Education and Development (NFMED) was the lead body; however, for simplicity, the MCI, as the executive arm of NFMED, the discussion here will treat it as the lead body, as this was effectively the case.

recommendations, endorsed by the Government (Department of Employment and Department of Education and Science, 1986), was *inter alia* to develop the methods for determining how competence may be defined and assessed. This was termed the '*standards programme*' and so we shall term the approach adopted as the '*standards approach*'.

The standards approach differs significantly from the Boyatzis-style competency analysis approach. The definition of 'competence' adopted early within the NVQ system is

> "the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the standards expected in employment."
> (Training Agency, 1989a: 6)

This is then glossed as follows:

> "This is a wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupational area. It encompasses organisation and planning of work, and coping with non-routine activities. It includes those qualities of personal effectiveness required in the workplace to deal with co-workers, managers and supervisors."
> (ibid.)

Such a definition seems to be consonant with Boyatzis, who subtitles his book 'A Model for Effective Performance'. However, the standards approach differs in that it may be seen as *not* as engaging in analysis of 'the ability to perform', but instead as focussing upon 'the standards expected in employment':

> "Standards state in outcome terms what is expected of an individual performing in a particular occupation role. They do not look at the underlying abilities or traits of the individual, but describe the expectations which the individual is required to meet."
> (ibid.)

Whereas the competency analysis approach seeks generic attributes which are *causal* of performance, the standards approach seeks to *describe the performance required.* This is described as an 'outcomes' model (Jessup, 1991; Burke, 1995), ie the emphasis

is upon the outcomes of (competent) performance rather than on identification of what were referred to as the 'inputs' necessary to for someone to perform competently.

After initial debate about how the standards, ie descriptions of required performance, should be determined, the Training Agency decided that a method referred to as 'functional analysis' should be 'recommended' (Mitchell, 1989)[37]. The method, which appears to have evolved over the initial period of the 'standards programme'[38], involves the definition of the overall 'purpose' of the occupation, then the progressive disaggregation of 'functions' and 'sub-functions' of an occupation, until units of competence and then elements of competence are described. The relevant Guidance Note number 2 presents the procedure as follows:

> "- Describe the key purpose of the occupational area.
> - Ask 'What needs to happen for this to be achieved?'.
> - Repeat the process until the functions being identified are at unit level.
> - Repeat the process for each unit, until the functions are at elements level.
> Unit level is reached when the functions are normally carried out in their entirety by an individual rather than by a team ..."
> (Training Agency, 1989a: 8)

A unit of competence is the smallest level at which credit towards a qualification may be awarded; each unit is comprised of a number of elements of competence (NCVQ, 1989). Each element of competence takes the form of a verb specifying an activity, the object of that activity, and the conditions; in addition, each element statement has performance criteria (Training Agency, 1988b). What is referred to as 'a standard' is

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37 No lead body refused to adopt functional analysis. This is understandable in that lead bodies were generally consortia of various interested parties, dependent upon the Employment Department for funding for the development of standards.

38 The first published account of the functional analysis method was a Guidance Note from the Training Agency (Training Agency, 1989a); the first detailed account of the rationale for the method was the book by Mansfield and Mitchell (1996), two of the key persons involved in the development of the method.

thus a statement of an element of competence with its associated performance criteria[39]. Figures 2.2 illustrates the framework of 'standards' developed by MCI for the NVQ for first-line managers (NVQ level 4); figure 2.3 is an example of one such 'standard', ie an element of competence with its performance criteria.

From such analysis of an occupation, the requirements for the award of a National Vocational Qualification could be established. This was to be based on the assessment of 'evidence' that the candidate had performed each element of competence satisfactorily, according to the performance criteria and across the range of circumstances described in the range statements. Unlike the competency approach of Boyatzis and of emulators, no separate assessment of *competencies* was to be undertaken; the standards provide the description of competent performance against which actual performance by a candidate for a qualification could be compared and judged. The candidate was to be judged as either 'competent' or 'not yet competent' according to whether the performance met the performance criteria[40]. Unlike traditional modes of assessment, the candidate was to be free to choose whatever evidence she or he wished, for assessment against the standards for a qualification; that is, they did not have to undertake some form of assessment, such as a written or practical examination, set by an awarding body. However, the most important form of evidence was to be that of 'real life' work activity, referred to as a 'natural source of evidence' (Training

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39 Also included in a standard was a 'range statement' describing the circumstances, situations etc in which the activity might be expected to take place.

40 A separate judgement of 'insufficient evidence' might be made where it was not possible to tell, from the evidence, whether the candidate had met the standard. Clearly this would not be a judgement of the individual's competence but solely of the evidence.

Agency, 1988b: 5).

The standards approach is clearly different from the Boyatzis approach not only in the type of items produced and the manner in which these are presented: unlike the competencies within the Boyatzis approach, occupational standards are *not* the product of *research* in the normal sense of empirical investigation. Rather, they are the outcome of a *process of consultation*, undertaken within the confines of the functional analysis method, and claim to present *normative expectations* of the work performance by occupants of the relevant managerial positions (Training Agency, 1989a; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996). This will be seen to be important when we discuss criticisms made of the standards approach.

The standards approach is certainly based on the assumptions of individualism and objective observability of performance. It appears to evade the issue of causality, as no attempt is made to assess the characteristics, attributes etc ('competencies') which, in the Boyatzis approach, are deemed to result in performance to the required standard. The standards approach merely asks 'has the candidate performed the elements to the required standard, ie met all the performance criteria?'. Yet clearly the whole rationale of the standards approach is that of *predicting* future performance. There is thus an assumption that performance to the required standard on one or more occasions, generating evidence on which assessment for an NVQ is undertaken, has some stability.

Overview of the First Line Management Standards

Key roles	*Units of competence*	*Elements of competence*
Manage operations	1 Maintain and improve service and product operations	1.1 Maintain operations to meet quality standards 1.2 Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work
	2 Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems	2.1 Contribute to the evaluation of proposed changes to services, products and systems 2.2 Implement and evaluate changes to services, products and systems
Manage finance	3 Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources	3.1 Make recommendations for expenditure 3.2 Monitor and control the use of resources
Manage people	4 Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel	4.1 Define future personnel requirements 4.2 Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements
	5 Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance	5.1 Develop and improve teams through planning and activities 5.2 Identify, review and improve development activities for individuals 5.3 Develop oneself within the job role
	6 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self	6.1 Set and update work objectives for teams and individuals 6.2 Plan activities and determine work methods to achieve objectives 6.3 Allocate work and evaluate teams, individuals and self against objectives 6.4 Provide feedback to teams and individuals on their performance
	7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships	7.1 Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's subordinates 7.2 Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's immediate manager 7.3 Establish and maintain relationships with colleagues 7.4 Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict 7.5 Implement disciplinary and grievance procedures 7.6 Counsel staff
Manage information	8 Seek, evaluate and organise information for action	8.1 Obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making 8.2 Record and store information
	9 Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions	9.1 Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions 9.2 Contribute to discussions to solve problems and make decisions 9.3 Advise and inform others

Figure 2.2 MCI Framework of 'standards' for NVQ level 4 for managers
(source: MCI, 1992: 6-7)

Manage finance

Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources

Make recommendations for expenditure

Performance criteria

a) Valid internal and external information is used in developing the recommendations.

b) Appropriate members of staff are encouraged to contribute to the recommendations.

c) Recommendations state clearly the net benefits which should be achieved from the expenditure.

d) Recommendations are presented clearly and concisely in an appropriate format.

e) Recommendations are compared with actual expenditure and used to improve future practice.

Range indicators

Recommendations are for items of expenditure within the manager's line responsibility.

Recommendations are made to:

- immediate manager
- financial specialists.

Potential benefits from expenditure include:

- profitability
- productivity
- quality of service/product
- working conditions.

Information used in evaluation is:

- directly related to proposed expenditure
- readily available within the course of work (e.g. cost from suppliers).

Recommendations take the form of:

- short written reports
- verbal briefings.

Figure 2.3 Example of a 'standard'
(source: MCI, 1992: 6-7)

2.3.4 Confusions and complications: the personal competence model and key skills qualifications

The standards approach, as described above and distinguished from the competency analysis approach, was however subject to some confusion and complication. First, although for the main part the standards approach tended to refrain from referring to 'competences', this was not always the case. In Guidance Note 3 (Training Agency, 1988b), the term 'competence' is used as a count noun ('a competence', 'competences') in the sense of 'element of competence'. It would seem that, in the early stages, there was an assumption even by those directly involved with standards development that frameworks of '*competencies*' were to be produced (see Collin, 1989). Thus a brief report on the progress on the management standards is titled 'Management Competences: The Standards Project' (MCI, 1989a); an article in the newsletter 'MCI Information Exchange', in 1990, refers to 'MCI's model of management competences' (MCI, 1990b); and a senior research officer with City and Guilds of London Institute[41] published an article with the title 'Managerial Competences' (Miller, 1991). However, this usage was dropped within the standards programme[42], so should not itself be taken as a serious conceptual problem.

More serious is the fact that, for management, in addition to the occupational

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41 The City and Guilds of London Institute ('City and Guilds') was the first of the major awarding bodies to make an explicit commitment to the emerging NVQ system (Raggatt and Williams, 1999: 76-79). City and Guilds had a long-established research and development department concerned with technical issues of assessment, the staff of which was significantly involved with development work undertaken by NCVQ and the Employment Department's Standards Methodology Branch. We are therefore warranted in taking Miller's usage of 'competences' as being common within the standards development programme, at least in its early stage.

42 See, for example, the revised version of the Guidance Notes (Employment Department, 1991).

standards (MCI, 1991c, 1991d), a separate framework of 'personal competences' was developed (MCI, 1991e). The document publishing the framework states that

> "whilst implicit within the MCI Management Standards, Personal Competence is of such value that it warrants explicit statement. Therefore, whilst the standards were being derived through functional analysis, separate research was undertaken alongside to develop and test the Personal Competence Model."
> (MCI, 1991e, 4)

These personal competences are described as 'the personal aspects which make a difference to being effective as a manager'.

> "Personal Competence captures those aspects of behaviour that managers personally bring to the post and which show how managers do their jobs effectively."
> (ibid.)

Such descriptions are consonant with those of the competency analysis models, as discussed above. The Personal Competence Model is shown in figure 2.4, from which its similarity with the competency analysis models can be recognised[43]. Assessment for NVQs management did *not* require a candidate to provide evidence of competence specifically in relation to the Personal Competence Model, the award being based solely on assessment against the *occupational standards*. It is true that element of competence 5.3 of the level 1 standards (ie for first-line managers) requires a candidate to 'develop oneself within the job role', the first-mentioned performance criterion being that "current competence and areas for development are identified against appropriate competence/ development model", and the accompanying guidance notes *suggesting* that the Personal Competence Model be used.

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43 Note the use of the term 'clusters' (of personal competence), echoing its use within the Boyatzis framework.

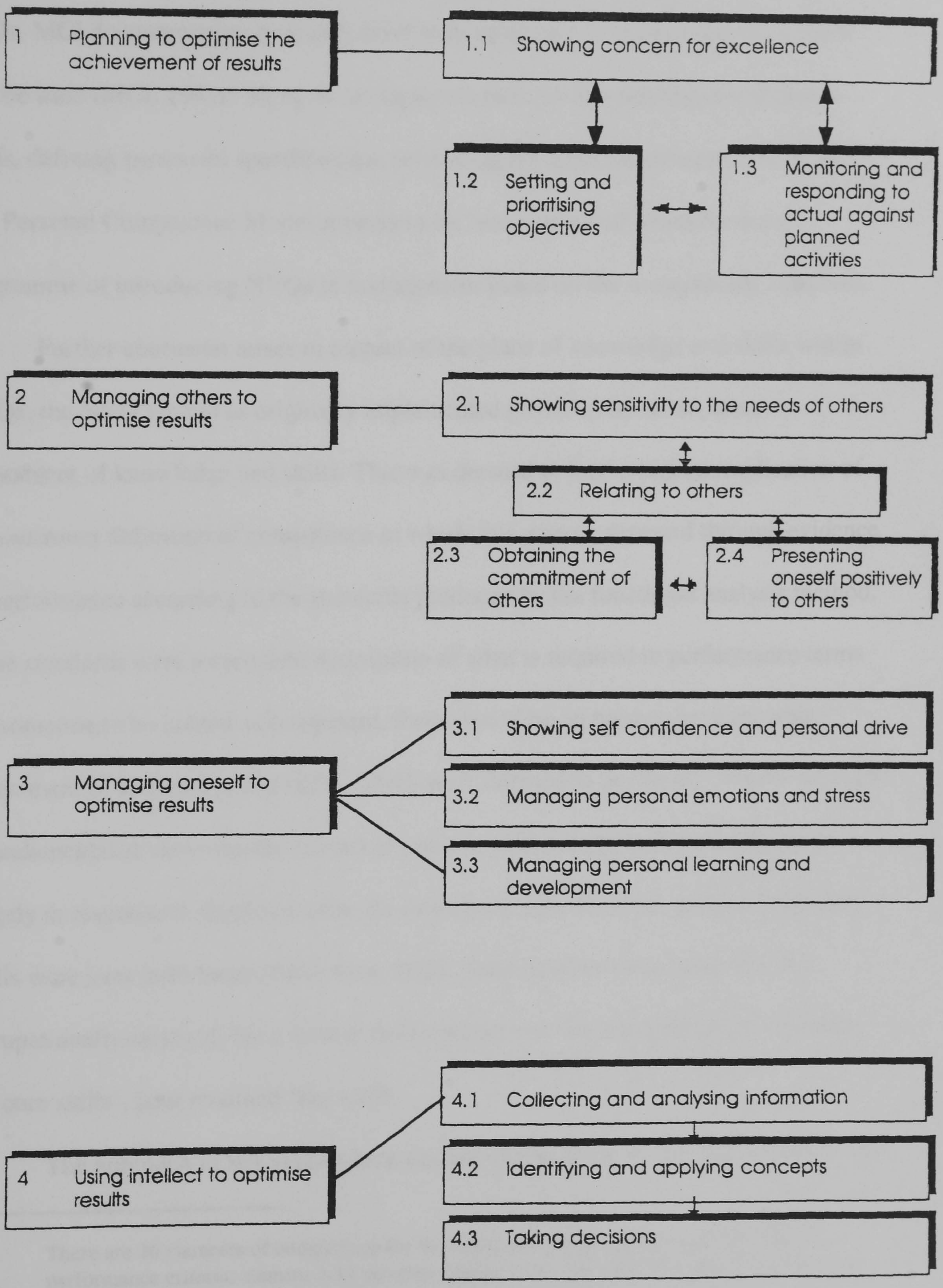

Figure 2.4 The MCI Model of Personal Competence
(source: MCI, 1989a)

However, the use of the Model is not mandatory, and, apart from this limited potential use of the Personal Competence Model[44] within the system of assessment for NVQs, MCI documentation give only brief indication on how it considers the Model may be used (MCI, 1991e: 9), eg as 'a diagnostic tool' for considering development needs, defining personnel specifications, informing the appraisal process, and so on. The Personal Competence Model appears to be 'semi-detached' from the main programme of introducing NVQs in management based on the occupational standards.

Further confusion arises in respect of the place of knowledge and skills within NVQs; the NVQ system as originally implemented provided for no separate assessment of knowledge and skills. This was deemed to be the logical implication of the *outcomes* definition of competence in which this may be assessed through evidence of performance according to the standards produced by the functional analysis method. If the standards were a complete description of what is required in performance terms for someone to be judged as competent, there should be no need to have separate assessment of knowledge and skills, which were deemed to be 'inputs'. However, such a fundamentalist view was the subject of considerable debate, and, it would appear, largely in response to employer pressure some basic specifications of knowledge and skills were later introduced (Beaumont, 1995). Such specifications were mainly occupationally-oriented, but a further development was the introduction of the notion of 'core skills', later renamed 'key skills'.

The approach to key skills which has been introduced by the Qualifications and

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44 There are 26 elements of competence for the Level M.I standards, and a total of 163 performance criteria; element 5.3 ('develop oneself in the job role') has seven performance criteria.

Curriculum Authority (QCA), the successor to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications[45], differs from that which is typically adopted within the skills agenda in higher education, although similar terms are used. However, the implementation of these follows a similar pattern to that of occupational standards in being oriented to assessment on the basis of evidence of performance. Each key skill is presented as a set of performances similar to elements of competence, with indicators of the evidence that must be shown to demonstrate successful performance (ie equivalent to performance criteria). The examples of such evidence are to be presented in a portfolio, as is typically the case for NVQ assessment. Although *external* tests are also to be taken, these are in effect merely additional items of evidence. Significantly, the QCA-endorsed key skills qualifications has been available since September 2000 at levels 4 and 5, and the QCA and Department for Education and Employment undoubtedly expect higher education institutions to consider seriously their introduction within undergraduate programmes. The response of institutions of higher education, and of the sector in general, is yet to be seen; it will, no doubt, be a significant part of a wider set of developments, including those related to issues of funding, quality assurance, and contestations over the locus of control for standards in higher education.

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45 And the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) with which NCVQ merged in 1995 to form QCA, along with the merger of the Employment Department and the Department for Education to form the Department for Education and Employment.

2.3.5 Summing up the assumptions about competence

To conclude this section, before moving on to discuss the rise of 'learning', we may broadly summarise the two approaches to competence as follows. The competency analysis approach views competence as capable of analysis in terms of a set of *generic attributes* of an individual, and seeks to *describe* these. Such attributes are taken to be *causal* of performance, and are assessed *obliquely* ie through assessment methods separate from actual (or simulated) performance in the occupation. In contrast, the standards approach views competence as amenable to assessment in terms of *performance* in the *specific activities* of the occupation, and seeks to *define the expectations* of such performance (ie it is a normative approach). No assumptions are made about causality, nor need such assumptions be made, as assessment is undertaken *directly* of actual or simulated performance in the occupation. As no assumptions are made about causality, the standards approach is primarily *retrospective*, that is, based on *past performance*; the competency analysis approach claims to be able to establish the factors which lead one to *predict* performance.

We may express an overview of the two approaches in terms of how they treat the overall question of whether a particular individual is or is not competent. In the competency analysis approach, each competency may be 'possessed' to a greater or lesser degree (scalar assessment), and so overall competence is a complex relationship between such competencies. For the standards approach, each area of performance is assessed in terms of a binary judgement (meets the standard/ does not meet the standard); overall competence *consists in* the *sum of the parts* (Norris, 1991), ie the totality of judgements for each area of performance. Adapting Searle's use of the terms

'*constitutive*' and '*regulatory*' rules (Searle, 1969), we may say that the standards approach is based on the former. That is, the rule for deciding the question of whether someone is competent is simply whether or not they have been assessed as competent in each element of performance; the question, posed about an individual who has been so judged, "yes, but are they competent?" has no meaning within the approach. For the competency analysis approach, such a question *is* meaningful, as there will always be questions about the selection of the competencies which have been assessed, and whether other methods of assessment may yield contrary results.

Having examined the underlying assumptions about competence, within the learning and competence agenda, we shall now turn to those relating to learning.

2.4 The rise of 'learning': meanings and assumptions

We have already noted that the emphasis upon learning, as indexed by the *explicit use of that term* in policy discourse, is a relatively recent development. Whilst to some extent such usage may be taken as no more than a convenient mode of expression for 'education and training', we noted that there were significant developments in respect of the notion of learning as taking place *outside* of formal provision of education and training, and in the adoption of the term 'learning outcomes' where previously (educational or training) 'aims', 'goals' or 'objectives' has been the normal usage. In this section, we shall explore these developments further to draw out the assumptions on which they appear to be based and how they connect with the assumptions explored above in respect of competence, such that we may refer to these as the 'conventional model of learning and competence'.

Jessup (1991), who may be regarded as the single most influential figure in the development of the standards approach (Burke, 1991: ix; 1995, vii, 3), begins his seminal book *'Outcomes: the Emerging Model of Education and Training'* with a chapter on 'Learning and Individuals' (Jessup, 1991). He starts with the statement that

> "The *measure of success* for any education and training system should be what people actually learn from it, and how effectively. Just common sense you might think, yet this is a comparatively new idea."
> (Jessup, 1991: 3; emphasis added)

Continuing, after contrasting this view with the traditional emphasis in educational literature upon institutional arrangements, curriculum theory, the practice of teaching, staff development, and so on, he asserts that

> "If we start from the viewpoint of the *individual* on the receiving end, that is the student, the trainee or just the *learner*, we begin to recognise that learning is not confined to what education and training provides. Learning is a personal experience which can take many forms and can occur in many places."
> (ibid.; emphasis added)

We therefore, argues Jessup, have to change our model and concepts:

> "If one accepts that the *central process* with which we are concerned is learning, and that learning can take many forms, education and training may be seen as helping to make that possible."
> (op. cit.: 4; emphasis added)

Individuals will learn more effectively, he continues,

> "if they are clear about the targets or outcomes they are trying to achieve. Learning is a *purposeful activity* and should be targeted on *explicit outcomes*.
> (op. cit.: 5; emphasis added)

In the space of three pages, Jessup thereby expresses a set of underlying assumptions about learning, on which he seeks to base the 'emerging model' of education and training. These assumptions can be seen as consonant with those identified in our discussion of competence.

First, we may note the emphasis upon the individual (*assumption of*

individualism). Secondly, learning is viewed as a *process*, which is distinguishable from the efforts by others (teaching or training) to bring it about (*assumption of learning as a process sui generis*). Thirdly, learning is an *activity*, one which an individual may *do*, such that we may refer to them as a *learner* (ie learn-*er*) (*assumption of learning as an activity*). Fourthly, the process of learning leads to (causes) *outcomes* (*assumption of causality*). Fifthly, the outcomes of the learning process may be taken as *measures of success*, which, as Jessup make clear in his book, elaborating the standards approach to competence, are based on *performance evidence* (*assumption of objective observability of performance*). The key additions to the set of assumptions noted earlier are, then, those of learning as a *process sui generis* and as an *activity*.

Although the above discussion relies upon a singular source, it may be warranted on the basis of Jessup's key role within the learning and competence agenda as Director of Research, Development and Information for NCVQ, and latterly Deputy Chief Executive, during its initial period. Formerly, he had been Chief Psychologist in the Department of Employment[46]. His views therefore may clearly be regarded as authoritative in respect of policy advocacy and of policy implementation; he is clearly taken as such by commentators on the development of the National Vocational Qualifications system (Burke, 1989:198; Burke1995; Eraut; 1994; Raggatt and Williams, 1999)[47]. We shall not, therefore, at this stage engage in further discussion of

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46 See Burke, 1995: 323-324 for brief biography of Jessup.

47 Eraut notes that "[m]ost of the critcal decisions [on the technical process for specifying standards] were presaged in a 1985 technical paper by Jessup..." (Eraut, 1994: 185)

the issues of learning in the conventional model; we shall return to the issues in the next chapter in discussion the literature in the debate on learning and competence.

2.5 Summary and conclusion: the conventional model of learning and competence

In this chapter we have sought to examine the development of the 'learning and competence agenda' in respect of policy advocacy, enactment and implementation, and in respect of practice advocacy, with particular reference to graduate employability and managerial competence. A set of key assumptions on which the agenda is based, in conceptual and theoretical terms, were then identified, such that we may see these as constituting what we have termed the 'conventional model of learning and competence'. These assumptions are:

- learning as a process sui generis;
- learning as an activity;
- individualism;
- causality, ie learning results in outcomes, competence, which results in performance;
- objective observability of performance;
- predictability.

Many of these assumptions are to be found in the various theorisations of learning within scientific psychology, which we shall consider in the next chapter. Whilst, as will be shown in chapter 3, there has been considerable critique of the notions of competence and key, or transferable, skill, there has been less attention given to the

notion of learning *as represented* in such theorisations. It is to that task that which the second part of the thesis will turn, following the examination of empirical evidence for the conventional model.

Having examined the learning and competence agenda in this chapter, chapter 3 will move on to consider the literature debating the key issues relevant to the issues under study in this thesis.

Chapter 3

Debating Competence and Learning:

Review of the Literature

3.1 Introduction

In chapter 2 we examined the development of what we have referred to as the 'learning and competence agenda', in terms of policy advocacy, enactment and implementation, and in terms of the practices advocated by the proponents of the agenda. From such examination, we identified a number of key conceptual and theoretical assumptions about learning and competence. The purpose in chapter 2 was primarily to consider the learning and competence agenda in its own terms, as presented in policy documentation and supportive advocacy literature, and as evidenced in the emerging implementation of such policy and advocacy. No discussion was entered into in that chapter concerning the validity of the learning and competence agenda, and of the underlying assumptions. In this chapter, we shall move on to consider the debate that has taken place with regard to learning and competence, through examining the relevant literature. The review of the literature will be selective, focussing upon the theorisation of learning and competence, as this has influenced the learning and competence agenda.

3.2 Approaches to the debate on management competence

Our concern in this thesis is with the notion of competence in respect of management, and in particular with the processes by which individuals gain entry to and progress within managerial positions. However, the literature on management

competence may be viewed as part of a wider literature on competence in general. Reviewing the research on competence, Bates (1995) asserts that, despite a considerable volume of literature, there was a "*dearth of critique and scholarship*" and a "*paucity of academic debate*" on competence, relative to the scale of the development of competence-based approaches and the speed with which they have spread. She suggests that four broad categories of research may be distinguished:

- technical literature;
- evaluative studies;
- 'spirit of education' studies;
- sociological perspectives.

Much of the *technical* literature has emerged from the 'competence lobby' (Bates, 1995: 30), ie those who are involved in the development of the standards approach, as we examined in chapter 2. There has also been some literature which critiques aspects of such *technical* work, principally concerned with the functional analysis method and in respect of the role of knowledge. *Evaluative* studies are concerned with the extent to which competence-based approaches achieve their stated aims, and/or with particular problems of implementation. The term '*spirit of education studies*' is used by Bates to refer to an eclectic body of work concerned with the critique of the assumptions about human behaviour and learning which underpin competence approaches. Finally, studies within a *sociological perspective* are those which examine the rise of the competence movement in relation to wider social and political issues.

Taking this broad categorisation, we shall examine, for our purposes here, the literature which is critical of *technical* aspects of competence approaches, and the

literature within the area which Bates refers to as '*spirit of education studies*'. However, as the main issues addressed by the literature critical of such technical aspects tends to raise matters also addressed by the 'spirit of education' literature, we shall not make such a distinction, but rather examine the specific criticisms made. These will be considered in two key areas:

- the extent to which management competence approaches adequately depict the nature of the occupation of management;
- the functional analysis method for analysing competence.

We shall also examine the criticisms that the concept of competence is flawed because of its basis in positivist and behaviourist theory. Such criticisms have also been applied to the skills agenda in higher education, and so the discussion of these criticisms will be presented (in section 3.4) *after* the discussion of other criticisms of the skills agenda (in section 3.3)

We shall address the *evaluative* literature, relevant to the concerns of this thesis, in chapter 6 where the claims of the learning and competence agenda will be subject to analysis in terms of secondary research evidence. Whilst undoubtedly important in terms of the issues addressed, the literature within the '*sociological perspective*' will not be examined here as it lies outwith our main concerns.

3.3 Competence and the nature of the management occupation

Critical contributions to the debate on the standards approach to management competence began very soon after the development process had begun (eg Burgoyne, 1989; Collin, 1989; Jacobs, 1989, 1990; Canning, 1990; Devine, 1990; Everard, 1990; Pye, 1991). Whilst much of this literature also concerns wider issues, a common concern raised was the extent to which approaches to management competence

adequately represented the nature of the occupation of management. One key claim made for the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) standards is that they provide a 'language' or 'vocabulary' for *describing* what constitutes successful managerial behaviour (eg Harrison, 1989; Miller, 1991). Prior to the establishment of MCI, Mangham and Silver (1986) had pointed to the problem of the lack of a common language for managerial competency:

> "Without that shared language, they [employers and managers] - and we [educators] - **are prey** to every fashion and gimmick that is presented and are forced into clumsy communication."
> (Mangham and Silver, 1986: 43)

Hirsh and Bevan (1988), in their research on the language of managerial skills found a broadly common terminology but lack of agreement on meaning. The development of a nationally agreed framework would therefore *appear* to be a desirable achievement.

However, this assumes that management as an occupation is characterised by a high degree of stable commonality, ie whatever constitutes competent performance by a manager in any one situation is very much like that which constitutes competent performance by any other manager in any other situation. A number of writers argue that such an assumption is invalid (Burgoyne, 1989; Collin, 1989; Lewis, 1992; Cave and McKeown, 1993; Talbot, 1993; Jubb and Robotham, 1997). Burgoyne (1989) states that

> "Much time and effort has been wasted on debating whether any two managerial jobs or situations are 'the same' or 'different'. The simple reality is that all managerial jobs are different at a detailed level of resolution, and all managerial jobs the same at a high level of abstraction... [T]he more universally true any given list of competencies is, the less immediately useful it is to making any particular choice about how to act and conduct oneself in a specific situation."
> (Burgoyne, 1989: 58)

Cave and McKeown (1993) draw attention to the empirical studies of 'what managers do' which has revealed a wide variation in behaviour by managers in different jobs,

and also by managers in the same job. 'A proper conclusion', they argue, 'is that generalisations about the nature of management are dubious' (Cave and McKeown, 1993: 123). Talbot (1993) makes a similar argument when comparing competence-based management development programmes with the assumptions about management adopted in MBA programmes. In the light of these arguments, it seems pertinent to consider the empirical studies of managerial behaviour.

Various attempts have been made in the past at describing what constitutes the nature of the practice of management, generally presenting this in terms of a rational, professional model. As Fayol (1949)[1], who is generally credited with the initial codification of the activities of management within such a model, states:

> "To manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command, to co-ordinate and control."
> (Fayol, 1949)

Such an approach was disseminated in the English-speaking world mainly by Urwick, through his book *The Elements of Administration* (Urwick, 1943) and his consultancy work. Variation elaborations and modifications of what is generally referred to as the 'classical school of thought' or 'classical view' in management, may be found in standard management textbooks that have appeared since the Second World War. However, empirical studies of managerial behaviour (Stewart, 1967a, 1967b, 1976; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982) raised serious challenges to the rational model of management activity. Stewart's studies identified considerable variety between managers in the nature of their work activities, which was characterised by brevity and fragmentation. Mintzberg is scathing of the 'classical' view of managerial work:

> "If you ask a manager what he does, he will most likely tell you that he plans, organises, co-ordinates, controls. Then watch what he does. Don't be

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1 The original French publication was 1916; the English translation did not appear until 1949.

surprised if you can't relate what you see to those four words."
(Mintzberg, 1975: 49)

The picture that emerges from these studies is that of managers who, as individuals, face a complex, fragmented, varied and ill-defined set of demands, which they deal with by a range of ad hoc responses; they typically prefer to use spoken rather than written communication, and tend to build a web of contacts, within and externally to the organisation, with whom they interact. The image is more of a political actor and '*bricoleur*' than of a rational long-range planner whose orientation is disinterestedly towards the organisation's goals.

From such findings and arguments, it would appear that the assumption within the *standards approach* that there is a significant degree of commonality in all managerial jobs, at the level required for standardised description for assessment purposes, cannot be sustained. For some, this provides grounds for supporting the *competency analysis* approach (Canning, 1990; Elkin, 1990), that is, the identification of personal characteristics, skills, attributes and so on which enable the individual to perform successfully (effectively) in various situations. The task would then be to establish, as Boyatzis (1982) claims, any 'common core' of such competencies for all managers and the more specific competencies related to different types of managerial jobs and circumstances, as identified through research such as that conducted by Stewart (1983), Mintzberg (1973), and Kotter (1982).

However, there are problems with these studies of managerial behaviour which suggest that the standards approach cannot be so simply rejected. Hales (1986) argues that the assumption that management can be researched in terms of observation of the behaviour of managers fails to provide for adequate interpretation of the *meaning* of such behaviour in terms of the functions of management. For this, a prior

theoretical framework is required, located and defined within some wider consideration of the organisational context. Burgoyne (1976) had made a similar point in respect of attempts to identify the components of managerial *effectiveness*[2]. Similarly, Carroll and Gillen (1987) argue that the classical functions approach represents the most useful way of *conceptualising* the manager's job (see also Thomas, 1993). The general point is that 'effectiveness' is a *normative* term that relates actual performance to that which is required. As 'competence' has similar connotations, a similar conclusion may be made.

It would therefore seem that the literature arguing that the standards approach does not adequately represent the nature of the managerial occupation, as evidenced in empirical studies of managerial behaviour, may fail to provide a sufficient basis for rejecting the approach. As we have seen in chapter 2, the standards approach uses the method of *functional analysis*, seeking to analyse the management occupation in terms of the *functions or purposes to be achieved* by managers. We shall therefore now move on to examine the literature focussing upon functional analysis.

3.4 Competence and functional analysis

We noted in chapter 2 that the two approaches to analysing competence used different methods. For the standards approach, the method of functional analysis was developed, and this has been clearly specified through technical documentation (Training Agency, 1989b; Fennell, 1991) and, more latterly, in a book authored by

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2 The notion of 'managerial effectiveness' may be seen as the precursor to 'management competence'. A number of studies were undertaken in the 1970s, aimed at identifying the characteristics of effective managers (Campbell et al., 1970; Reddin, 1971; Brodie and Bennett, 1979; Langford, 1980). Burgoyne (1976) argued that effectiveness cannot be identified by 'empirical digging', as it is a relational concept, requiring an answer to the question 'effective at what?'. This requires a clear understanding of the function of management, which itself is a contested area. See also Hales (1980) for a critical review of the studies of managerial effectiveness.

two of the key personnel in the development of the method (Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996). The method used for the competency analysis approach, as described by Boyatzis (1982), follows the conventionally-accepted empiricist practices within occupational psychology. However, as we noted, it would appear that the in-company bespoke competency frameworks and skills models in higher education are not based on a strict application of the method described by Boyatzis. In this section we shall examine the criticisms of functional analysis, firstly in terms of its technical validity, then in broader terms relating to the notion of 'functions'. Further criticisms will be made in chapter 6, in terms of the empirical evidence in respect of the claims made for functional analysis.

Stewart and Hamlin (1992a) criticise functional analysis on both practical and theoretical grounds. In practical terms, they argue that functional analysis results in statements of activity ('elements of competence'), using an example given by Mansfield (1989a): 'reproduce copies of documents and information'. Stewart and Hamblin state that this merely describes *what* is done (an output)[3], not *how* it is done (ie process). They seem to argue, although not clearly, that this is insufficient for assessment of competence for qualifications as it is necessary to be assured that the individual can perform the work processes required in the occupation.

On theoretical grounds, Stewart and Hamlin (1992a) criticise functional analysis as being theoretically derived from 'the functionalist school of thought in sociology' (op.cit., 30). Criticisms of a functionalist sociology therefore, they argue,

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3 Responding to Stewart and Hamlin (1992a), Mansfield (1993) points out that their use of 'outputs' is incorrect: the correct term is 'outcomes'. Stewart and Hamlin (1994) respond that the term 'outputs' was used in some early literature on standards development, and that the difference between the terms is immaterial to their argument.

are applicable to the use of functional analysis within organisations. Stewart and Hamlin do not elaborate on this argument except to give the example of the 'unitary' view of industrial relations, that is, the assumption that shareholders, managers, employers and trade unions share the same common interests. In a later article, Stewart and Sambrook (1995) elaborate only slightly more on the charge that functional analysis is based on functionalist assumptions:

> "Functional analysis can be interpreted as being *functionalist*, in the sociological sense. The concept of ***purpose***, which lies at the heart of the method, appears to be used in a way which is consistent with that of ***function***, which itself is central to structural functionalist analyses of social systems. If this position is accepted, then the method can be argued to be objectivist in orientation and, consequently, positivist as a research and analytical method."
> (Stewart and Sambrook, 1995: 102)

Mansfield (1993) responded to the criticism that functional analysis is based on the assumptions of functionalist, or, as Mansfield put it, structural-functionalist, sociology: such a criticism, based on the fact that the word 'function' is shared by both is, he asserts, a case of 'guilt by semantics'. He goes on to claim that

> "Any careful reading of the literature on functional analysis bears out the fact that it has emerged from the hermeneutic and dialectical traditions of social science."
> (Mansfield, 1993: 20)

However, he provides no literature citations except an unreferenced allusion to "the work of Talcott Parsons". Mansfield repeats this claim in a subsequent book (Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996), where the only citations provided are to two books by Parsons, no references being given to any literature in 'the hermeneutic and dialectical traditions of social science'. It is noticeable that Mansfield takes the matter as a serious issue, thereby apparently accepting the implication that, if functional analysis were based on the assumptions of structural-functionalist sociology, then its validity

would be undermined. It is therefore worth examining the charge and Mansfield's response.

Although Stewart and Hamblin (1992a) give no citations, their use of the term 'functionalism' appears to be based on the work on paradigms in sociology and organisational theory, by Burrell and Morgan (1979)[4]. Burrell and Morgan (1979) analyse organisational theory and research in terms of a framework of four sociological paradigms, based on two dimensions: assumptions about the nature of social science (the 'objective vs subjective') and assumptions about the nature of society (the 'regulation vs radical change dimension'). The terms 'functionalist' and 'interpretive'[5] are applied by Burrell and Morgan to the sociological paradigms, and to organisational theory and research within those paradigm, which differ in respect of their assumptions about the nature of social reality (ie the 'objective vs subjective' dimension). Functionalism assumes that the social world has an existence which is separable from the existence of the individual human beings within society, and that this is amenable to objective analysis. The work of Parsons (cited by Mansfield as the author of 'structural-functionalism') is located by Burrell and Morgan in the functionalist paradigm. In contrast, the 'interpretive' paradigm regards social reality as one which is created or constructed by human beings in their interactions with each other. Mansfield's use of the phrase 'hermeneutic and dialectical traditions' is clearly

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4 Personal communication with J. Stewart. Note also his discussion of the Burrell and Morgan framework in his later book (Stewart, 1999: 13-15).

5 'Interpretive' is the spelling used by Burrell and Morgan, and is retained for the discussion here. More generally in this thesis, the alternate spelling, 'interpretative', will be used when referring to social science perspectives and approaches which emphasise the centrality of interpretation in the production of social meaning.

consonant with Burrell and Morgan's 'interpretive' paradigm[6]. Having sketched, albeit fairly simply, this mode of distinguishing the 'schools of thought' (Stewart and Hamlin, 1992a) or 'traditions' (Mansfield, 1993), we may now move to adjudicate on the charge that functional analysis is based on functionalist social theoretical assumptions.

There is, in fact, a straightforward way of adjudicating between the positions held by Stewart (Stewart and Hamlin, 1992b; Stewart and Sambrook, 1995) and Mansfield (Mansfield 1993; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996). We can see clearly the legacy of functionalist organisational theory in the text used to introduce the method in Guidance Note 2 (Training Agency, 1999a: 8):

> "Within any organisation - whether business, commerce or public sector - each individual contributes to the organisation performing effectively. They do so by carrying out those functions which lead to the organisation satisfying its mission or purpose. Functional analysis is the process of identifying those functions and breaking them down until they are described in sufficient detail to be used as standards."

This assumption of some overarching purpose of an organisation, which can be subdivided, is a key aspect of functionalist organisational theory, particularly in systems theory approaches[7]. The model is one of the harmonious working of the parts of the system, each fulfilling its allotted function such that the system as a whole achieves its overall unitary purpose or goal. Although the authorship of the above quotation from Guidance Note 2 (Training Agency, 1989a) is not stated, Mansfield

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6 This is evidenced by the statement that the terms 'hermeneutic and dialectical traditions' "relate to social theories and methodologies which are based on a process of 'interpretive understanding'..." (Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996: 99)

7 Functionalist organisational theory has been subjected to considerable critique, as documented by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and shown by subsequent writings by others (eg Reed, 1992; Clegg and Hardy, 1996; Hatch, 1997). However, that is beside the point for the present discussion, which is concerned with adjudicating the rival claims over whether functional analysis is or is not based on the assumptions of functionalist social theory.

appears to identify himself with such a view in other writings. Thus, he states that

> "The process [of functional analysis] starts by developing a 'key purpose' - *the* answer to the question 'what is *the* purpose of jobs and roles in this sector. *The* key purpose is a 'definition' of the entire occupational area in outcome terms and it should be capable of describing the occupational sector, organisations which operate specifically within the sector, key groups or departments in organisations as well as the expectations of individuals[8]." (Mansfield, 1989b: 6: emphasis added)

Mansfield and Mitchell refer to the '*identification*' of a key purpose statement as an attempt to *describe* the *unique contribution* made by an industry or occupation [to the economy] (Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996: 105).

This is very different from the 'hermeneutic' tradition on which Mansfield *claims* functional analysis is based; for it to be as Mansfield claims, there would be *no* discussion of effectiveness, mission, purposes or functions *as if* these had clear reference. Rather, each would be regarded as being capable of having differing meanings and being differently understood by different individuals and/ or groups; the emphasis would be on how such understandings and meanings related to each other, how they changed, and how they manifested themselves in interaction. It would just not meaningful, within the hermeneutic tradition, to refer to '*the* key purpose', or talk in terms suggesting the harmonious linking of individuals, groups, departments, organisations, and occupational sectors as if these were *objective* aspects of social reality. We may therefore adjudicate on the side of Stewart and against Mansfield on this matter (Stewart and Hamlin, 1992a; Stewart and Sambrook, 1995; Mansfield, 1993; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996).

It is, of course, open to Mansfield to *accept* that functional analysis is based on

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8 Mansfield's phrasing 'expectations of individuals' is ambiguous here. From the context, it seems clear that he means the expectations held *about* individuals, ie what outcomes they should achieve.

functionalist social theory, and to seek to justify the method within that paradigm. We have examined the dispute because Mansfield *appears to believe* that it would matter if the assumptions upon which functional analysis is based were indeed those of functionalist social theory. The key characteristics of functionalism he wishes to reject as characterising functional analysis are 'pseudo-scientific objectivity', reductionism, and behaviourism (Mansfield, 1993: 20; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996: 99). These have formed the basis of criticisms by other writers, in respect both of the competence movement and of the skills agenda in higher education, and will be considered in section 3.6 below.

3.5 The skills agenda in higher education

We noted in chapter 2 that the skills agenda in higher education could be traced back primarily to the joint statement, in 1984, by the University Grants Committee and the National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB/ UGC, 1984). That document referred explicitly to "transferable intellectual and personal skills" as being the "abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life, as well as public and social administration" (op. cit.: 4). That is, the emphasis was upon the *post-graduation employment* of students. However, whilst the skills agenda, as promoted by initiatives such as Enterprise in Higher Education, has been oriented towards employment[9], there has also been an element within the skills agenda which is concerned with what are viewed as the skills required *within* higher education (eg Laybourn et al, 2000). Bridges (1993) attempts to distinguish between four different conceptualisation of skills: cross-curricular, core, generic and

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9 Or what now tends to be termed 'employability'.

transferable skills. The first three are broadly concerned with what are deemed to the requirements of students for their studies in higher education, and 'transferable skills' are related to the *post-graduation* contexts into which students will go. Similarly, Barnett (1994), using the term 'competence' but explicitly as a synonym for the term 'skills' (op. cit.: 5, 166), distinguishes between 'academic competence' and 'operational competence'.

The general argument put forward in favour of the skills agenda is that research shows that employers need, or want[10], graduates who possess certain skills (Smith et al., 1989; Harvey et al., 1992; Allen, 1993; Harvey and Green, 1994; AGR, 1995; Harvey et al., 1997; CVCP, 1998). However, the *lists* of such supposed skills differs between the various research studies, making comparison between them difficult. Even where similar terms are used, and *even if* agreement *could* be achieved on the terms to be used, the conclusion noted by Hirsh and Bevan (1988), referred to earlier in respect of *management skills*, may be applied in the case of the skills agenda in higher education: whilst there *may* be agreement at the level of terminology we cannot be certain that there is agreement at the level of meaning.

The argument of employer need or want in support of the skills agenda is challenged by a number of writers. Gubbay (1994) presents a number of reasons why teachers in higher education may be sceptical about (transferable) skills, not because of an 'attitude problem', but because of the nature of their roles and the pressures under which they work. These include the perception that 'skills training' is not part of the job of teachers, which is "devoted to inculcating students into the disciplines

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10 There is a noticeable lack of differentiation between need and want in respect of justifications for the skills agenda. Whilst employers may *want*, or *say they want*, graduates with certain purported abilities, it does not follow that they need them.

which they [teachers] profess" (Gubbay, 1994: 49). A similar view is expressed by Barnett (1994)[11], and is supported by research by Dunne (1995) and Dunne et al.(1997). However, the fact that many teachers in higher education may not see skills development work as a legitimate part of their role, or that there are resource restrictions and patterns of reward and career progression which militate against such work (Gubbay, 1994: 49) is not in itself a sufficient argument against the skills agenda. Whilst the resource issues may be a basis for negotiation or even contestation between the various parties, the perception of the legitimacy of skills development within the teaching role may be viewed, by protagonists for the skills agenda, as a matter of 'changing the mindset' (Burniston et al., 1999).

Brown and Scase (1994) take up the issue of the changing nature of employment in the context of changes in organisational structures arising from wider economic and technological change. Whilst, as we noted in chapter 2, such changes have been cited as the reasons for major educational and training policy developments over the past two decades. Brown and Scase argue that employers recruit on the basis of *suitability, capability* and *acceptability*; whilst the first two concern ability to perform in the job, the last-mentioned is concerned with 'social fit', ie

> "in terms of outlook, interests, connections, style, dress, speech, which provide the 'personal chemistry' required for a smooth transition into the organization's way of doing things, based on personal compatibility with colleagues and clients."
> (Brown and Scase, 1994: 130)

'Social fit' is thus equated with 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which is primarily acquired within the social milieu into which an individual is born

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11 Barnett's analysis is more thorough-going, arguing for a reformulation of the nature and purpose of the university in contemporary society, as one concerned with 'life-world becoming' (Barnett, 1994).

and raised. Scase and Brown argue that employers will still tend to recruit personnel for positions which have traditionally been viewed as 'graduate jobs' on the basis of acceptability. As it is primarily the new universities which recruit students whose backgrounds are typically *not* those in which such cultural capital is acquired, and because skills approaches tend to be emphasised more in such institutions, there is likely to be an increased social division in the graduate labour market.

> "[T]he rise of mass higher education is unlikely to give lower socio-economic groups access to the fast-track, partly because they are unlikely to display the *social* qualifications that employers covet. [...] Indeed, the formal teaching of personal and social skills represents the latest version of 'compensatory' education for those who lack the personal qualities which come naturally through the everyday social education within the middle class family and educational settings".
> (Brown and Scase, 1994: 170)

Such consequences appear to be borne out by recent research (Purcell et al., 1999; Pearson et al., 2000). However Brennan (2000) suggests that Brown and Scase "overstate their case". Whilst it may be the case that mass higher education does not give lower-socio-economic groups access elite, fast-track employment, it may still provide "an emancipatory and transformative role" the much larger group of students who now undertake higher education. The basis of such a view is that when the outcomes for *matched* cohorts are examined, it is clear that graduates fare significantly better in employment terms than their counterparts who did not undertake higher education. Moreover, various studies report high levels of satisfaction, by graduates, with their experience of higher education. Certainly the most recent large-scale study of graduates in employment indicates that after three and a half years, less than 2% of economically active graduates are unemployed, and less than 10% in a non-graduate occupation (Elias, 1999). However, Brennan's response to

Brown and Scase does not constitute an argument *for* the skills agenda. Whilst, on a cohort basis, graduates may benefit in terms of their employment outcomes, compared with their peers, this tells us nothing about *how individual graduates* gain employment, and how that process relates to their experience as students.

The basis of the skills agenda, as we saw in chapter 2, is that students may acquire and develop skills in higher education which may be *transferred* into employment. The concept of transferability has been the subject of critical comment by a number of writers (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Griffin, 1994; Barnett, 1994; Hyland, 1998). Griffin (1994) refers to the "aura of untouchability" of the concept:

> "That transfer takes place was and is so powerful an assumption as to be deemed beyond discussion: what we think or can do just *does* transfer from one situation to another."
> (Griffin, 1994: 134)

Similarly, Hyland (1998) states that, given the absence of empirical evidence in support of transferability,

> "[t]hat skills of any kind will transfer can, thus, be seen to be largely a matter of faith, and the existence and virtues of transferable skills are simply asserted, not demonstrated."
> (Hyland, 1998: 168ff)

Bridges (19923) challenges that, without a theory of social domains, the notion of transferable skills is neither intelligible nor applicable.

> "We need to ask perhaps what would make one social context different from another to the extent that it might constitute a challenge to the transfer of skill, so that the fact that people showed a capacity to apply something learned in one context to another, demonstrated that they has mastered a *transferable* skill."
> (Bridges, 1993: 49; emphasis in original)

Similarly, Wolf (1991) argues for 'the primacy of context' in our understanding of 'core skills', the term cognate with 'transferable skills' as used in National Vocational Qualifications until its replacement by the term 'key skills'.

> "... these skills are by definition inseparable from the contexts in which they are developed and displayed, and ...they only make sense (or, rather, the

same sense) to those who have the same recognition and understanding of those contexts."
(Wolf, 1991:194)

Hyland (1998) considers the "wishful thinking" about transferability to have arisen partly because of "powerful myths and fallacies" which underpin the concept. The "fallacy of misplaced concreteness"[12] consists in

> "the tendency to reify aspects of human behaviour. Thus, there is a jump from performing an action or task *skilfully* to the identification of a discrete or substantive *skill* possessed by the performer."
> (Hyland, 1998: 169)

There is also the "generalising fallacy", assuming that because some putative skill can be performed in a range of similar contexts, then it can be transferred to *all contexts*. Taking the example of 'problem-solving' as such a putative skill, he argues that there is

> "no general routine, no one set of procedures, no algorithm that will *at the same time* facilitate the solving of a chess problem, show people the way out of difficulties in personal relationships, diagnose an electrical fault and help sort out a difficult passage in Hegel."
> (ibid.)

Hyland points to various aspects of what people do in their lives, such as making wise decisions, making accurate assessments and making friends, and asks why we do not naturally speak of 'wisdom', 'accuracy' and 'friendship' skills, which would equate with reification of other skills.

Such issues lead us on to the criticisms made concerning the behaviourist assumptions which underpin the concepts of both competence and key skills, to which we now turn.

3.6 Behavourism, skills and competence

The criticism that competence and skills approaches are behaviourist has been

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12 This would appear to be similar to Ryle's notion of a 'category mistake' (Ryle, 1949: 17ff).

made by many writers (eg Ashworth and Saxton, 1990; Marshall, 1991; Norris, 1991; Ashworth, 1992; Hodkinson, 1992; Hyland, 1993, 1994). However, there are some differences in the way that this criticism is made. Some (eg Norris, 1991; Ashworth, 1992; Hodkinson, 1992; Hyland, 1993, 1994) refer to the emphasis upon description of *performance or behaviour*, linking this with the behavioural objectives movement. Such an emphasis upon behaviour is seen as discounting or marginalising knowledge (Ashworth and Saxton, 1990; Ashworth, 1992; Hodkinson, 1992; Hyland, 1993, 1994). The tendency to engage in analysis of behaviour into atomistic elements, losing the overall holistic character of human conduct, is a further feature of competence approaches, according to some writers. Some writers refer to 'positivism' (eg Jones and Moore, 1993, Hodkinson and Harvard, 1993) and more specifically 'logical positivism' (Hodkinson, 1992) or 'verificationism' (Assiter, 1993). The literature also varies in respect of whether it addresses competence approaches *in general*, or it focusses on a *particular* approach (especially the standards approach), or provides a framework of alternative or competing approaches (eg Hodkinson, 1992; Winter, 1992; Stewart and Hamlin, 1993)

Focussing particularly on the approach to competence adopted for National Vocational Qualifications, ie what we have termed the 'standards approach', Hodkinson and Harvard (1993) argue that the underlying belief system may be referred to as 'behaviouristic' because of its positivistic ontology combined with a view of learning partly based on behaviourism. Hyland (1994, 1995) makes similar reference to behaviourist learning theory as informing the standards approach, asserting that

> "There can be no denying or disputing the fact that the NCVQ model of

> CBET [competence-based education and training], both in terms of its design and implementation, is based on and informed by behaviourist learning theory."
> (Hyland, 1995: 49)

Hyland (1994) elaborates on this by discussing the key features of behaviourist learning theory, and of its influence on educational theory and practice primarily in respect of behaviour-modification techniques and in the emphasis upon behavioural objectives.

Hyland's depiction of the standards approach as adhering to the assumptions of behaviourist learning theory is, however, overstating the case. The technical literature emerging from the NCVQ lobby explicitly avoids specifying how education and training (or 'learning') should be organised; the standards are developed for *assessment* purposes rather than for programme design (Mansfield, 1989b). The charge of behaviourism is on safer ground in referring to the *methodological* principle of behaviourism as Watson (1913) presented it, ie the exclusion on non-observables, such as assumed internal mental states and processes, from psychology as a *scientific* endeavour. Insofar as approaches to competence, both of the standards and the competency analysis varieties, allow only for measures of observable behaviour, they may be regarded as 'behaviourist' in such methodological terms.

Such a cautious view of approaches to competence as being behaviourist would, however, still render them open to the general criticisms of behaviourism in terms of

> "its circumscribed account of human thought and action, and its failure to account for reasoning, understanding and learning..."
> (Hyland, 1994: 51)

Ashworth and Saxton (1990) argue that competencies have an unclear logical status, which prevents a clear judgement of competence being made even when behaviour is observed. Uses the example of the competence of (a manager) being able to

communicate with a diverse set of people, they point out that

> "One person may do this communication by direct personal performance. Another manager may well get information effectively across to the relevant people, but does so because he or she delegates communication to another individual who is known to be a good communicator."
> (Ashworth and Saxton, 1990: 9)

Only the first of these managers can be credited as being competent if this is taken at the level of what an individual does (communicating), but in respect of the overall result both may be viewed as competent. As we shall argue in chapter 8, the fact that any particular behaviour may be viewed in a variety of ways raises important issues which suggest an alternative perspective on competence, and on learning.

3.7 Psychological theorisations of learning

We noted in chapter 2 the growing emphasis in policy literature upon the notion of learning, evidenced in the increasing use of that term, and of various other word forms based on the stem 'learn-' and phrases using such words[13]. This development may also be seen in the practice advocacy literature, that is, writings which promote the view that pedagogic practice should be oriented towards the 'facilitation' of learning. Such practice advocacy literature typically refers to academic literature, concerned with theorising and researching learning. In this section, we shall selectively review this literature, particularly in respect of notions of learning as a process *sui generis*. We shall not be concerned here with the literature which addresses research on the *study* practices and approaches of students (eg Entwistle and Hounsell, 1975; Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1984), nor with literature on

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13 For example, 'learner', 'learning outcome', 'lifelong learning' and so on.

teaching practices (Bligh, 1971; Brown and Atkins, 1988)[14]. The focus here is upon the main theorisations of *learning* which have influenced the learning and competence agenda.

Many writings on learning, addressed to teachers and trainers in post-compulsory education and training, typically present theories of learning in terms of different 'schools of thought'. Whilst various classifications are adopted (see table 3.1), the main paradigms of twentieth century psychological theory are usually represented, particularly behaviourism and cognitivism. Humanistic psychology is also represented, with Rogers (1969a) and Knowles (1970) being the main sources cited. However, the most significant development in the theorisation of learning in relation to educational and training practice is a range of ideas concerning what is referred to as 'experiential learning', emphasising the role of experience and reflection in (Kolb, 1971, 1984; Boydell, 1976; Boot and Reynolds, 1983; Boud et al., 1985, 1993; Weil and McGill, 1989). We shall now examine the main features of such approaches to the theory of learning, to identify key assumptions that appear to be accepted within contemporary presentations.

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14 We shall, in chapter 7, consider the relationship between the concepts of 'studying', 'teaching' and 'learning'. It will argued there, following Ryle (1948), that whilst 'studying' and 'teaching' denote activity, 'learning' does not; it is a different type of concept, serving a different function.

Table 3.1: Classifications of learning theory

Burgoyne & Stuart (1977):	Conditioning (behaviourist) Information transfer Cybernetic (systems theory) Cognitive Social Experiential (humanistic)
Jones (1982):	Behaviourist Cognitivist Humanist
Rogers (1986):	Behavioural Cognitive Humanist
Jarvis, et al (1998):	Behaviourist Cognitivist Social learning Experiential
Stewart (1999):	Behaviourist Social Cognitive Experiential Humanist
Armitage et al. (1999):	Behavourism Gestalt Cognitive Andragogy

3.8 Behaviourism and cognitivism

Early behaviourist studies treated learning as a process by which particular patterns of behaviour were brought about by reinforcement of responses to stimuli (Thorndike, 1921); even complex behaviour was viewed as merely built up from stimulus-response connections. The theory of learning developed from such behaviourist studies is generally referred to as 'connectionist theory', 'conditioning theory', 'stimulus-response theory' or simply 'behaviourist theory'. Later behaviourist psychology allowed for 'intervening' variables, ie various states within the 'organism' (Tolman, 1932; Hull, 1952). Cognitivism is generally viewed as "a strong reaction against the facile approach of Behaviourism" (Eysenck, 1984: 2), and sought to explain complex learning in terms of factors which were non-observable but capable of inference from observed behaviour. 'Cognitive processes' such as perception, thinking, memory, problem solving, concept formation, were issues with which cognitive psychology concerned itself, the analogy with the information-processing undertaken by the internal mechanisms of the computer being taken as a model for explanation (Eysenck, 1984). Some writers, such as Gagné (1965) sought to provide a comprehensive model which incorporated both simple learning, as studied and theorised by conditioning theory and higher level learning, with which cognitivism was primarily concerned.

We may note here some commonalities within these different approaches. Learning is viewed as a *process* which can be analysed and explained. Although there may be different forms of learning, ie *what* is learnt, the assumption is that the term 'learning' indexes some process with certain features which are common to all forms of learning. In their influential book summarising the state of the psychology of

learning by the mid-1960's, Borger and Seaborne give a number of widely different examples of learning and ask:

> "What is it [about the examples cited] that makes us use the same word 'learning' in every case? What is the common feature?"
> (Borger and Seaborne, 1966: 12)[15]

Their answer is that in each case the learner *changes* according to criteria which are specific to the situation, leading them to their oft-cited definition of learning as

> "any more or less permanent change of behaviour which is the result of experience.
> (op.cit.: 14)

Learning is thus viewed as a *causal process*, with experience[16] being the efficient cause and behaviour the effect. Cognitivists would allow for intermediate results, in the form of internal 'cognitive structure', but this is based on inference from observable behaviour according to a theoretical model of information processing; that is, learning is viewed as involving some *internalised* process. In both behaviourism and cognitivism, learning is to be studied at the level of the *individual entity*, usually referred to as an 'organism' (in behaviouralism) or 'subject' (in cognitivism). These assumptions have been carried through into much of the later literature on learning, which we shall now consider.

3.9 Humanistic psychology and andragogy

Whilst much of the theorising and research within cognitivism is concerned with *meaningfulness* of learning, this is often treated rather narrowly in terms of connections between new knowledge (information) and existing knowledge (cognitive

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15 We shall see, in chapter 7, that this assumption that the use of a word such as 'learning' must *refer to* something is central to conceptual confusion in the learning and competence agenda; clarification of such conceptual confusion will lead us to a reframing of learning and competence within an alternative, *relational* perspective.

16 Clearly the meaning of the term 'experience' under behaviourism is limited to that of a 'stimulus' affecting an 'organism', no account being taken, in the case of human beings, of the *meaning* that such experience has to the persons concerned.

structure). 'Meaningfulness' is interpreted differently in Rogers' (1970) presentation of *humanistic* theory of learning, and in Knowles' writings on *andragogy*, 'the art and science of helping adult learn' (Knowles, 1970, 1980; Knowles and Associates, 1984). For both of these learning is a self-initiated *active* process, requiring educators and trainers to respect the *autonomy* of the individual learner and in engage them in determining what and how they should learn, and how such learning should be evaluated[17]. *Experience* is central to such a view; this is not the sensory-input of conditioning, nor the information of cognitive theory, but involves the 'whole person' ie the affective (feeling and emotion) and the cognitive (thinking). Such ideas were also prevalent in *sensitivity training*, or *T-Group training*[18], a small-group based approach which focussed on *feelings and emotions*, rather than theory and concepts, as the source of learning about the 'self' and interpersonal relationships (Schein and Bennis, 1965; Shaffer and Galinsky, 1974; Cooper, 1976)[19].

Whilst the humanistic philosophy which informs the work of Rogers and

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17 Both Rogers and Knowles argue that directive approaches to education and training are ineffective in bringing about *significant* learning because they tend to give rise to resistance. Their main argument is, however, based in humanistic philosophy, ie that only a 'facilitative' or 'andragogical' approach accords with the treatment of others as full 'persons', autonomous selves.

18 See Smith (1969, 1981) for a review of the T-Group method, and its underlying ideas, as applied in the context of training for 'improving skills in working with people' in employment contexts. Smith's booklet (Smith, 1969) was commissioned and published by the UK Department of Employment and Productivity, as part of a series of Training Information Papers, and was republished in an abbreviated form as part of a collection on approaches to interpersonal relations training (Cooper, 1981).

19 The 'T' in T-Group simply stands for 'training'. The origins of T-Groups lie in the work of Kurt Lewin, particularly concerned with the perceived problem of authoritarianism within the institutions of society. Initially applied in industrial settings, ie being used to develop managers' self-understanding ('authenticity') and 'sensitivity' to others, the approach was generalised giving rise to a variety of approaches including encounter groups (Rogers, 1969b). There would appear to be a range of then-current influences on such developments, including democratic political philosophy (in the immediate post-World War II period), existentialism, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and human relations approaches in management theory.

Knowles has a certain intuitive appeal for many involved in post-compulsory education and training, there are a number of problems regarding the assumptions about the nature of learning. As with behaviourism and cognitivism, learning is viewed as a *natural* to human beings; however, the emphasis is now upon establishing the conditions under which learning is not stifled through the directiveness of the traditional pedagogic, didactic approach. The emphasis upon self-direction raises difficulties in respect of how this can fit with expectations set by qualifications-awarding institutions and employing organisations concerning what *should* be learned. Tennant (1988:18) cites the case of the application of andragogic principles which is included as an example in Knowles and Associates (1984) '*Andragogy in Action*': the orientation (induction) address to new employees at Lloyds Bank of California carries the warning that

> "If you fail to take advantage of the resources offered, then you will not become competent, not progress and probably not be with us in the future." (Knowles and Associates, 1984: 75)

Tennant questions whether this accords with the humanistic principles cited by Knowles. We may add to this that there would appear to be difficulties with the notion of learning as a *natural* process, if such a view is applied to what is taken to be learning in contexts where normative criteria are applied, as is the case in the education-to-employment trajectory. We shall return to this in developing the relational approach.

Perhaps because of their dissatisfaction with what they perceive as 'traditional' approaches to education, Rogers and Knowles provide no clear statement about what learning *is*. Their orientation is more towards advice to those who seek to adopt a facilitative, andragogical approach in their educational practice. Tennant (1988: 17)

that Knowles seem to view theories of learning as 'products' to be consumed and disposed of at will, thus taking no account of the explanatory force that such theories may hold. Both Knowles and Rogers give examples of the *methods* that may be used to facilitate learning, emphasising participative and experiential methods, but these are warranted more by their philosophical stance rather than by a theory of how learning takes place, as attempted by behaviourist and cognitivist approaches.

3.10 Experiential learning theory

A major development which *does* attempt such explanation of how learning takes place, drawing upon the notion of 'experience' central to humanistic/ andragogical approaches, is the model of the 'experiential learning cycle' proposed by Kolb (1971, 1984):

> "Learning is conceived of as a four-stage cycle. Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a 'theory' from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences. In this approach the teacher serves as a facilitator of a learning process that is basically self-directed."
> (Kolb, 1971: 2) (see figure 3.1)

Kolb later provided a 'working definition' of learning as

> "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience."
> (Kolb, 1984)

In the earlier of these two texts, Kolb indicates that the main source for his thinking were sensitivity training (citing Schein and Bennis, 1965). Kolb also cites cognitivist theorists in that text, but not Rogers or Knowles. However, he cites these in the latter text, along with Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Jung, Freire Maslow (Kolb, 1984: 15). Kolb's model of the experiential learning cycle thus claims an intellectual ancestry that has special appeal to adult educators seeking a theorisation of learning which avoids behaviourist explanation.

Moreover, the Kolb model was initially presented in a *textbook on organisational behaviour* (Kolb, et al.,1971), primarily for use in business school contexts. Each chapter of the textbook, now in its seventh edition (Osland, et al., 20001), is organised in terms of the four stages of the cycle: an experiential situation is posed (and activity for students to undertake), followed by a set of questions to aid reflection, then by some concepts and theory, finally setting some further activities for students to undertake to apply the generalised principles developed. The textbook thereby provided a practical application of the Kolb model, an example which others could adopt in their own teaching and training.

Various representations of the model, or more generally of 'experiential learning theory', are now often taken to be valid descriptions of learning as an *active* process, by many textbooks in the management education, training and development field . Thus Woodall and Winstanley (1998) assert that:

> "The last 20 years have witnessed a transition from management *training* to management *learning*. The shift of emphasis is away from developing the capacity of the instructor to transfer knowledge effectively to a passive learner, and towards facilitating learning, and helping the learner to learn. This is reflected in the displacement of the dominance of cognitive learning theory by experiential learning theory."
> (p.142; emphasis added)

Harrison (1997) discusses just two 'theories about learning', the Kolb model and stimulus-response theory, stating that

> "taken together, they have much to tell us about how learning can be managed in an organisational context."
> (p. 225)

Torrington and Hall (1998) are even more parsimonious, restricting their discussion of 'the nature of learning' to a combination of the Kolb model and the work of Honey and Mumford. Dale (1993) starkly states that she takes the Kolb model to be 'an accurate representation of adult learning' (p.152).

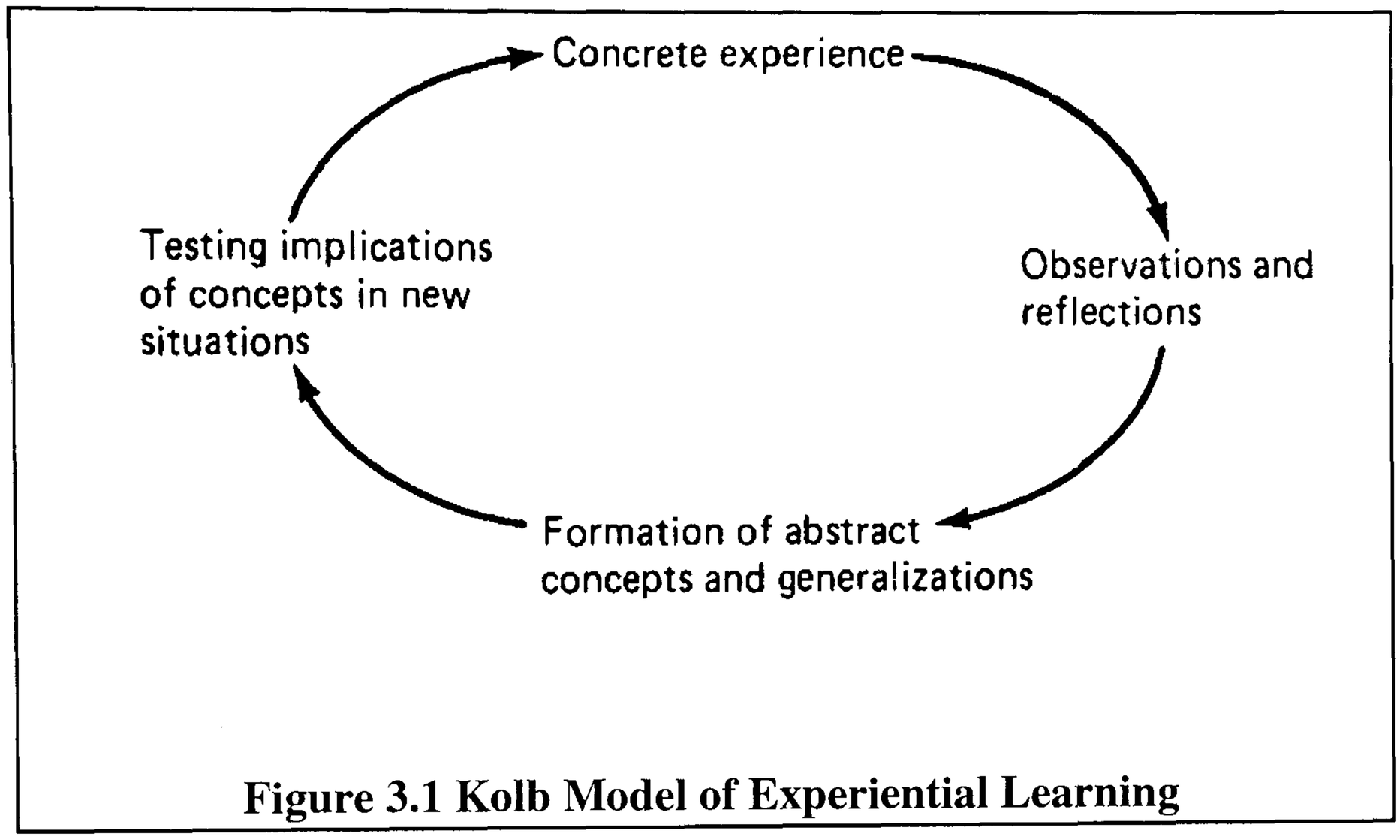

Figure 3.1 Kolb Model of Experiential Learning

Gibbs et al. (1994), writing about transferable skills development asserts that "the learning of skills involves a four-stage cycle", presenting this in slightly different terms from those use by Kolb, without even citing the original source[20]. So too, in texts for teachers in higher education, the Kolb model is taken as being an appropriate representation of learning (eg Blaxter, et al, 1998: 88; Fry et al., 1999; Jarvis et al, 1999: 48). A 'synthesis study' of 'experience-based learning within the [higher education] curriculum', published jointly by the CNAA and the Association for Sandwich Education and Training, presents the 'basic concept of experiential learning' in terms of the Kolb cycle (Davies, 1990).

A number of other writers have theorised learning in ways that are largely consonant with Kolb's theory, often drawing upon similar source traditions, sometimes citing Kolb. Schön (1983) developed his notion of the 'reflective practitioner' from his work with managers and professionals, with a background of studying (for his PhD) the work of Dewey, a source also mentioned by Kolb. Marsick (1988), and Marsick and Watkins (1990) emphasise *informal* and *incidental* learning, taking place *outside* formal education and training programmes, particularly through workplace activity. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), and Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) examine the role of reflection in 'turning experience into learning'. Jarvis (1987) seeks to extend what he sees as over-simplification in the Kolb model, by developing a model of nine 'responses to the potential learning situation', which include three 'non-learning' and three 'non-reflective learning' responses (Jarvis, 1987: 28-35).

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20 The terms used by Gibbs et al. are 'do' (in place of 'concrete experience'), 'reflect', 'form principles', and 'plan' (Gibbs, 1994: 13). However, Gibbs had earlier used the Kolb model of experiential learning as the basis for a 'guide to teaching and learning methods' (Gibbs, 1988).

The work of Revans on *Action Learning*[21] has been particularly influential in management development (Revans, 1971, 1982; Casey and Pearce, 1977; Pedler, 1983[22]). Action Learning involves managers undertaking some significant project, outside of their current experience, and using their experience whilst managing that project to develop their understanding of management in order to determine their next actions. A group (or 'set') of such managers meet on a frequent and regular basis to act as supportive critical questioners to each other, aided by a facilitator ('set advisor') whose role *may* include providing ideas and theories *but only* in response to requests from set members. Whilst Revans had developed the main set of ideas comprising Action Learning long before Kolb developed his own experiential learning model, some subsequent writers have presented the Kolb model when discussing Action Learning (eg McGill and Beatty, 1992).

Such a wide range of influences and varied presentations of approaches to what is termed 'experiential learning' defies simple summary. For the purposes of this thesis we may note a number of key issues that are generally held in common within these views on experiential learning. First, learning is viewed as a *process* which may be examined and conceptualised *in and of itself*, generalisable across varied situations of learning. Experiential learning theory thus continues in the tradition of behaviourism and cognitivism in this respect; whilst emphasising learning as a *continuing* process, the key stages in the process are viewed as being repeated in a

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21 The term is given capitalised initial letters to indicate that it is the name of a particular and distinctive approach.

22 Revans (1982) comprises a collection of various writings over four decades; Casey and Pearce (1977) present an account of the first employing organisation in the UK to adopt Action Learning for management development; Pedler (1983) provides an edited collection of chapters on the ideas and practice of Action Learning, with an extensive bibliography.

cyclical manner. Secondly, learning is located within or at the level of the *individual*; although the individual interacts with the 'external world', this takes the form of *action taken on* and *experience of* that external world by the individual[23]. Thirdly, the learning process is *causal*: experience results in further action through engagement in reflection and conceptualisation.

3.11 Learning theory: summary discussion

The foregoing examination of the main psychological approaches to learning theory has shown that a common set of fundamental assumptions are common, albeit with variations. Whilst the studies of learning within the main scientific psychological paradigms of behaviourism and cognitivism have treated learning as a phenomenon observable in both animals and human beings, the humanistic/andragogical and experiential approaches have been solely concerned with human learning. These latter approaches are now widely accepted within both higher education and management education, training and development, and viewed as providing a valid basis for attempts to bring about learning in these contexts. Whether such a view is valid or not will be the subject of examination, in empirical and theoretical terms, in this thesis.

3.12 Conclusion

We have examined in this chapter a range of literature relating to the conventional model of learning and competence. Whilst there has been considerable criticism of the notions of 'competence' and 'skills', much of this has been misplaced or insufficient to undermine the conventional model's claims to validity. There are, however, a number of indications of where there are problems, principally in respect

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23 Kolb (1984) explicitly refers to the notion of 'feedback' when discussing experience.

of the manner in which competence and skills are conceptualised with regard to performance. The various approaches to learning theory have maintained the assumption that learning is a process *sui generis*, with increasing emphasis upon the active role of the individual in that process. Such notions have fared better than those of competence and skill, gaining widespread acceptance. Whether the conventional model of learning and skill has validity in explaining the processes by which students make their passages through higher education into graduate employment, and the processes by which individuals gain entry into managerial positions, will be examined in this thesis. In the next chapter, the investigative methods adopted for the thesis will be explained.

Chapter 4

Investigating Learning and Competence:

Methods and Rationale

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 2 we presented the 'conventional model of learning and competence' as the set of assumptions on which are based recent developments, in policy and practice, in the fields of higher education and of management education, training and development. Specifically, the developments examined in this thesis are the 'transferable' or 'key' skills approach for enhancing graduate employability, and the Management Charter Initiative's *standards* approach to managerial competence and National Vocational Qualifications for the occupation. This chapter will describe, and provide a rationale for, the methods of investigation which are adopted here, in developing a critique of the conventional model of learning and competence and in beginning to construct the alternative 'relational perspective'.

The investigative approach adopted here may be regarded as a form of *triangulation* (Denzin, 1971; 1978), in respect of *data* and of *methods*. The implementation of the conventional model of learning and competence is investigated through analysis of *data* in respect of two settings as indicated, ie graduates entering employment and persons entering managerial positions ('data triangulation'). In addition, the *methods* which are used in this investigation are multiple ('methodological triangulation'). First, the issues which arise in individuals' transitions from educational to employment contexts will be examined through the

analysis of transcribed *interviews* with 'novice'[1] managers and graduates entering employment. Secondly, the claims made for the competence approach in management education, training and development (METD), and the skills agenda in higher education, will be examined in relation to empirical findings of what has resulted. This will provide a test of the conventional model; should the claims *not* be borne out, as will be argued, this will warrant consideration of an alternative perspective. However, given the implicit, and sometimes explicit, appeal to 'common sense' (Jessup, 1991; Murphy and Otter, 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000), this may not be sufficient to successfully challenge the validity of the model, but taken as merely indicating the need for further empirical work within the framework of the conventional model. A further methodological approach, that of *conceptual analysis*, will be adopted to seek to address the issue of *systematic ambiguity* of the key terms ('learning', 'competence', 'skills' etc), through clarification of their meaning. Finally, as this thesis seeks to present an alternative to the conventional model, the alternative model will be subjected to test through re-analysis of *transcribed interviews*, previously used in the critique of the conventional model of learning and competence.

These mode of employment of these methods, and the rationale for them, will now be discussed.

4.2 Interview data: persons in transition

The adoption of the conventional model of learning and competence in respect of graduate employability and managerial competence is presented, by its proponents, as a valid depiction of the educational and training contexts with the occupational

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1 The adoption of the term 'novice manager' will be explained in section 4.2.

context. If this depiction is valid, we might anticipate that this would be reflected in the accounts given by those who make the transition between these contexts, new graduates entering employment and novice managers. Whilst there have been studies of such persons conducted in relation to the conventional model[2], these typically ask respondents to indicate what 'skills' they consider they have developed (or not), need, or use in their jobs; or they may ask respondents to rank or rate items from a list of 'skills' presented. As the validity of the assumptions regarding skills is a matter of contestation here, it has therefore been considered necessary to undertake empirical investigation in a manner which does *not* presuppose such assumptions. A set of semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals who may be considered to have recently been, or to be currently, going through a transition in relation to the subject of this study, ie management and graduate employment. Reference by the interviewer to the terms 'learning', 'skills' and 'competence' were avoided, allowing respondents to talk about their experiences in their own terms; the extent to which these terms were used by respondents thus forms a test of the validity of the conventional model.

Twenty two interviews were undertaken with individuals who may be said to be engaged in the transition into managerial positions. At the time of interview, nine were students on a management studies course; a further seven were graduates employed in a public service organisation, on a graduate management development programme. For both groups, it may be said that each individual was seeking to gain

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2 As will be shown in chapter 6, much of what is presented as research-based literature on the key skills approach in higher education presupposes the validity of the concept of 'skills' by asking, variously, employers, students/ graduates, and teaching staff to rate or rank the items in skills lists.

recognition as being 'worthy' of employment as a manager. Finally, interviews were carried out with six members of staff at a secondary school who carried some form of responsibilities such that these would, most likely, *now* be said to be 'management' but hitherto (prior to the mid-1980s) would *not*. In these cases the issue was the extent to which such staff viewed themselves *as* managers. See table 4.1 for a summary of the details of those interviewed. Interviews were recorded on audio tape and transcribed; transcriptions[3] were analysed using qualitative data analysis software.

The term 'novice managers' is used in this thesis to refer to all those interviewed, because it is the transition into managerial positions that is of interest. However, it should be noted that in many cases the individuals did not, at the time of interviewing, hold a formal managerial position; the fact that they were undertaking the management studies course, or were on the graduate management development programme, places them on a trajectory *espousedly intended* to lead them to managerial posts. Some of the respondents *did* hold formal managerial positions, and had done so for some time; however, it was particularly the transition into management that was of interest, thus warranting the use of the term 'novice manager'.

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3 The transcriptions were content-oriented, and so did not utilise additional notation methods of conversational analysis to indicate eg pauses, vowel extension, emphasis etc (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

Table 4.1 Interviews with 'novice managers'

Interviewee Reference code	Male/Female	Formally holding a managerial post?	Type of job/ organisation
NA	F	no	admin/ university department
NB	M	no	publishing
NC	F	no	publishing
ND	M	yes	facilities management
NE	M	yes	security administration
NG	M	no	civil service
NH	F	yes	health service
NJ	F	yes	special needs housing
NK	F	no(?)	health service
MA	M	no	government-owned enterprise
MB	M	no	---- ditto ---
MC	M	no	---- ditto ---
MD	M	no	---- ditto ---
ME	F	yes	---- ditto ---
MF	F	no	---- ditto ---
MG	F	no	---- ditto ---
BA	F	yes[4]	secondary school
BB	M	?	secondary school
BD	F	?	secondary school
BE	M	yes	secondary school
BF	M	?	secondary school
BG	F	yes	secondary school

[4] Interviewees BA and BG were deputy heads of school, and BE was a head of technical services indicated as holding a managerial post. The other three interviewees from the secondary school were heads of department and, for the reasons given in the text, whether they hold managerial positions is shown as questionable.

The study of 'novice managers' here may be considered in relation to other empirical studies of managers, their work and their lives, which were referred to in discussing the debate on management competence. These have generally taken for granted that those studied *were already* managers, rather than, as here, being concerned with the process by which they *became* managers. The persons studied tended to be middle managers, with many years experience, rather than individuals who were either seeking to be managers or were relatively recently appointed to managerial positions (Clements,1958; Clarke, 1966; Stewart, 1967, 1976; Pahl and Pahl, 1971; Mintzberg, 1973; Poole et al, 1981; Kotter, 1982; Scase and Goffee, 1989)[5]. There are few studies of those who are 'becoming managers', the notable cases being Hill (1992) and Watson and Harris (1999). Hill followed 19 managers, in two companies, over their first year after their appointment to managerial positions, through interviews (face to face and by telephone) and observation, 'time spent in' selected orientation and training sessions, and 'time spent' with the managers' colleagues, superiors, and subordinates[6]. Watson and Harris base their analysis on 'unstructured' interviews with forty managers who were

> "at a state of change or movement in their working lives that they would themselves see as a significant step into a managerial career."
> (Watson and Harris, 1999: 23)

For this study, a single round of interviews were carried out for both graduates

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5 As discussed in chapter 3, the work (cited) of Stewart, Mintzberg and Kotter forms the major literature on the thesis that empirical studies of managerial work contradicts the views of the classical school, based on the work of Fayol (1949), that managers engage in rational processes of planning, organising, decision making, controlling etc.

6 Hill describes how, in conducting a previous research project with middle managers, she was 'struck by the disproportionate attention these managers devoted to and the vehemence with which they described their earliest experiences as manager.' (op.cit.: 305)

and novice managers. This study differs from the studies by Hill (1992) and Watson and Harris (1999) in that it was not primarily concerned to develop an analysis of the process of 'becoming a manager' based on major empirical study, but to explore how such a process relates to our understanding of the nature of learning and competence in and for occupational arenas. The Hill (1992) and the Watson and Harris (1999) studies do, however, provide support for the basis of the interview-based study conducted for this thesis.

Interviews were also conducted with 14 graduates[7] (excluding the graduate management trainees referred to above) concerning their transition from being an undergraduate to their current employment position (see Table 4.2). The key issues related to whether their current employment would be viewed as a 'graduate job', how they came to be in such a job, what was involved and how they might have been better prepared for their post-graduation experience of seeking and gaining employment.

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7 Of these, seven interviews were conducted by other researchers, as part of two small funded research projects under the direction of the author; all analysis was undertaken by the author.

Table 4.2 Interviews with Graduates in Employment

Interviewe eReference code	Male/Female	Post	Type of organisation
GA	F	Information Officer	Finance
GD	F	Rights Director	Publishing
GF	M	(ex) Consultant	Management consultancy
GH	M	Consultant	Telecoms
GJ	M	Economist	Civil Service
GL	M	Marketing	Telecoms
GO	M	Administrator	Education
SA	M	Policy & Information Officer	Community Organisation
SB	F	Training executive	Training company
SC	F	Policy advisor	Educational charity
SD	F	Accounts	Recruitment agency
SE	F	Account	Architectural services
SL	M	Sales executive	Publishing
SN	F	Sales executive	Hotel

Studies of graduates in the UK tend to be survey-based, generating quantitative data, with few qualitative studies (Harvey et al, 1997; Ward and Jenkins, 1999). The work of Harvey et al. (1997) is a large research study, involving semi-structured interviews with 139 strategic and line managers and 84 graduates. However, their study is primarily focussed on the nature of graduate *work,* particularly in terms of employers' requirements and changes in these, and tends to be framed within a conventional approach to skills and attributes. Ward and Jenkins (1999) interviewed 16 graduates, three from each of six cohorts of graduates (minus two who were not interviewed) from a single course, over a 20 year period, taking an *oral history* approach.

Ward and Jenkins (1999) point out that their study is limited, being restricted to the graduates of one course. However, they state

> "We know of very little research where representative graduates from twenty years of a Higher Education course have been traced and given an hour or more's space to reflect on the value of their degree. We do not understand why this should be."
> (op. cit., p. 85)

They point out that the millions of pounds spent on evaluating British higher education, and suggest that the wide variety of methods fail to address their main question:

> "What is the long-term impact (if any) of a degree on the individual lives of a representative group of graduates?"
> (op cit, p.86)

Harvey et al. (1997) similarly draw attention to the various studies which attempt to "prioritise skills required by managers", especially those based on quantitative data collection methods (op. cit.: 6). These tend to suffer, they argue, from a major problem, that of "terminological confusion and imprecise clarification of concepts" (op.cit.:7). Their aim in adopting a qualitative approach, they state, is to

> "get behind the meaning of skills, competencies and abilities - rather than generate more lists - to explore what they involve, in practice, in the work setting."
> (Harvey et al., 1997: 7)

The argument in thesis would support such aims, but question the persistence with which they are pursued by these writers, that is, their failure to provide an adequate framework for analysis which does not rely upon an unexplicated conceptualisation of 'skills'. However, in terms of methodological validity, they lend support to the use of interviews with graduates for investigating the issues of concern in the thesis.

4.3 Identifying the claims: documentary analysis

The claims made for the conventional model of learning and competence, as applied in respect of managerial competence and in higher education, have been put forward in a wide range of documents. These form one source of *empirical materials* for investigating the model, whereby the claims made in such documents may be compared with what has actually occurred. That is, in so far as the claims made for the competence approach to management education, training and development, and for the skills agenda in higher education, were made in advance of their implementation, they may be taken as *quasi-predictive* and so capable of confirmation or falsification by subsequent events.

Over the past two decades, there has been a large volume of policy documentation relating to the issues under study in this thesis. These may be divided into three groups, referred to here as *'policy dissemination'*, *'policy advocacy'*, and *'practice advocacy'*. The term 'policy dissemination' is used to refer primarily to texts published by state agencies empowered to decide education and training policy, or responsible for dissemination of such policy as determined by a higher body. The

obvious case here would be Government White Papers, such as 'Working Together: Education and Training' (DE/ DES, 1986)[8], presented to Parliament by one or more Secretaries of State, and which articulate Government policy *decisions*[9]. However, normally the detailed implementation of policy is undertaken by government departments and agencies, and, particularly in the education and training fields, by quasi-autonomous agencies which are *formally* separate from government[10]. A large volume of documents, detailing how policy should be implemented, has been produced by the many agencies involved with education and training policy, particularly where the agencies have legal powers over the resourcing for and assessment of other organisations involved in education and training provision. The prime example here is that of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)[11], established in 1986 to oversee the implementation of policy on the reform of vocational qualifications. The main documents in this group are listed in table 4.3.

Of course, policy is not merely decided upon high, then disseminated down for implementation; various groups and agencies[12] are actively engaged, *inter alia*, in

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8 This White Paper announced the Government's decisions with regard to the Review of Vocational Qualifications, leading to the establishment of the NVQ system.

9 Formally, a White Paper requires Parliamentary approval but this generally presents no problem where the party in government has an effective majority.

10 Typically referred to colloquially as 'quangos' (quasi-autonomous non-government organisations), now often called 'non-departmental agencies' in official documents.

11 Now replaced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), formed by the merger of NCVQ with the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) in 1996.

12 And individuals who have achieved what is perceived as 'authoritative' status, such that their opinions are deemed worthy of serious consideration and whose writings are typically cited by others in their policy advocacy texts. These would include Lord Dearing (chairman of the three 'inquiries' into education in the mid-1990s), Professor Charles Handy (chairman of the working party on management education, training and development that reported in 1987, the 'Handy Report', and Sir Christopher Ball (Director of Learning at RSA and Chairman of the National Campaign for Learning).

seeking to influence policy. The status of such groups and agencies, and their relationship to the centres of policy determination, varies considerably. Some are temporary bodies, such as the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education[13] (1997) set up by Government to address major areas of policy and bring forward *recommendations*, or established by other agencies to inform their own policy advocacy.

13 Other recent examples include the working group on the review of vocation qualifications (de Ville, 1986) and the working party which produced the report on 'The Making of Managers' (Handy, 1987).

Table 4.3 Policy Dissemination Documents

Document	Published by	Date
A New Training Initiative: An Agenda for Action	MSC	1981
A New Training Initiative: A Programme for Action	DE/ DES	1981
Training for Jobs	DE/DES	1984
Employment: The Challenge for the Nation	DE/ DES plus others	1985
Working Together - Education and Training	DE/ DES	1986
Review of Vocational Qualifications	MSC/DES	1986
Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge	DES	1987
Employment for the 1990s	Employment Department	1988
NVQ criteria and procedures	NCVQ	1989
Education and Training for the 21st century	DES/ DE	1991
Higher Education: a new framework	DES	1991
NVQ criteria and guidance	NCVQ	1995
Lifetime Learning: A Policy Framework	DfEE	1996
The Learning Age	DfEE	1998

Some agencies, established with the intention of having longevity, are clearly linked strongly with certain political parties[14], and thus the extent of such an agency's influence on policy is likely to be determined as much by the internal processes of the party as by party's electoral fortunes. Others espouse, and may be required by law, to be non-partisan, basing their advocacy by the reasoned case presented to the appropriate constituencies whose support is deemed necessary[15]. The documents from such agencies are typically presented as 'consultative', 'contributions to debate', intended to 'stimulate discussion', and so on, but often are clearly oriented towards some particular policy direction. Others are referred to as 'visions'[16] or presented as 'research'[17]. Table 4.4 lists the main documents analysed, from this group.

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14 Political parties themselves develop and advocate policy proposals, most formally documented in manifestos at the time of general elections. In addition, various 'think tanks' have been set up by groups aligned with one or other political party. The Centre for Policy Studies was generally seen as being close to the policy understandings of the Conservative government whilst Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister; the Institute for Public Policy Research is deemed to be close to the Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair.

15 In this group we can include for example the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA), the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), and the Association for Graduate Recruiters (AGR).

16 eg the NIACE (1993) report 'An Adult Higher Education: A Vision' and RSA's 'For Life: A vision for learning in the 21st century' (Maxted, 1996).

17 Typically such documents are heavy on policy recommendations and light on details and justification of the research on which such recommendations are purportedly based.

Table 4.4 Policy Advocacy Documents

Document	Source	Date
Ruskin College speech	Prime Minister, James Callaghan	1976
Education, Taining and Industrial Performance	CPRS	1980
A New Training Initiative: A Consultative Document	MSC	1981
Profiles	FEU	1982
Training for Skill Ownership	IMS/ MSC	1983
Competence and Competition	MSC/NEDC	1984
A Strategy for Higher Education in the Late 1980s and Beyond	NAB	1984
Technical Note on the New Training Initiative: Implications for Standards, Assessment Procedures and Accreditation	MSC	1985
A Challenge to Complacency	MSC/ NEDC	1985
Assessment, Quality and Competence: Staff Issues for NCVQ	FEU	1986
Management Training: Context & Practice	ESRC/ DTI	1986
Transferable Personal Skills in Employment: the Contribution of Higher Education	NAB	1986
Review of Vocational Qualifications	MSC/DES	1986
The Making of British Managers	BIM/CBI	1987
Perspectives on Management Training and Education: The Results of a Survey of Employers	BIM/CBI (with C & McC report)	1987
The Making of Managers	MSC/NEDC/BIM	1987
Development of Assessable Standards for National Certification	TA	1988
Enterprise in Higher Education: Supplementary Notes of Guidance	Training Agency	1989
Towards a skills revolution	CBI	1989
Higher Education Developments: The Skills Link	DE	1990
What Can Graduates Do?	UDACE	1991
Careers Education and the Curriculum in Higher Education	NICEC/ CRAC	1992
NVQs/ SVQs at Higher leveles	Employment Department	1992

Learning Outcomes in Higher Education	UDACE	1992
An Adult Higher Education - A Vision	NIACE	1993
Assessment Issues in Higher Education	Employment Department	1993
Competence & Assessment issue 29	Employment Department	1995
Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century	Association of Graduate Recruiters	1995
Realising the vision: A skills passport	CBI	1995
Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs	EAG	1995
A Vision for Higher Level Vocational Qualifications	Employment Department	1995
Vocational qualifications and standards in focus	HEQC	1995
What are graduates?	HEQC	1996
Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs: A report on the findings	NCVQ/ SCOTVEC	1996
For life - A vision for learning in the 21st century	RSA	1996
Lifelong Learning in England and Wales	NIACE	1997
Learning for the Twenty-First Century (Fryer Report)	NAGCELL	1997
A new partnership [CVCP response to Dearing]	CVCP	1997
Higher education in the learning society	NCIHE	1997
Graduate Standards Programme: Final Report	HEQC	1997
Accreditation and Teaching in Higher Education (Booth Report)	Planning Group for Accreditation and Teaching in HE	1998

The term '*practice* advocacy' is here used to refer to individuals, agencies and activities concerned to influence how institutions of higher education, teaching staff, employers, and management educators and trainer go about their educational and training practices. There are obviously overlaps here with *policy* advocacy, in that the same agencies may be involved in both, and any particular document may address both. Moreover, the documents which are taken to be in the practice advocacy area are more varied, including books, published reports (including 'working papers'), and textual materials intended for use in staff development contexts such as courses for new teachers in higher education. The type of books which would be included in this area are those which make strong claims for certain types of pedagogic practice, usually written by, or based on the writings of, persons who have achieved 'guru-like' status (cf Huczynski, 1993)[18]. Examples of some of the key reports within this category of practice-advocacy are shown in table 4.5.

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18 Major figures include Carl Rogers (on learner-centredness), Malcolm Knowles (andragogy), Kolb (experiential learning cycle); often it is the popularised, even vulgarised, versions of the work of such writers, rather than the original writings, that are used in practice advocacy. The presentation of the ideas (purportedly) based on such writings would seem to fit Davis's notion of 'interesting theories', whereby *part, but not all*, of the readers' assumption-ground of education and training is challenged whilst offering 'practical' implications for practice (Davis, 1971).

Table 4.5 Practice Advocacy Documents

Document	Source	Date
Assessment, Quality and Competence: Staff Issues for NCVQ	FEU	1986
Transferable Personal Skills in Employment: the Contribution of Higher Education	NAB	1986
Competence & Assessment	MSC/TA/ED	1987
Classifying the components of management competences	Training Commission	1988
Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods	FEU	1988
Development of Assessable Standards for National Certification	TA	1988
Enterprise in Higher Education: Supplementary Notes of Guidance	Training Agency	1989
Developing Standards by Reference to Functions	TA	1989
What Can Graduates Do?	UDACE	1991
Careers Education and the Curriculum in Higher Education	NICEC/ CRAC	1992
Learning Outcomes in Higher Education	UDACE	1992
Assessment Issues in Higher Education	Employment Department	1993
Competence & Assessment issue 29	Employment Department	1995
Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century	Association of Graduate Recruiters	1995
What are graduates?	HEQC	1996

4.3 Claims vs outcomes

In the early years of the NVQ system, criticisms were often met with the response that the system should be 'given a chance' to prove itself (cf Miller, 1991). There was little *external* evidence of performance[19] against which the claims being made for the system might be compared and their validity assessed. However, the *actual* framework of the management occupational standards, ie the MCI competences, does provide *empirical* material for assessing the validity of the claims made for it. For example, it was claimed that the competence framework would be easy to use for assessing competence, because it represented well the actual practice of management, rather than theories about management. Examination of the framework should therefore enable a judgement to be made on how easy to use they actually are.

Moreover, during the 1990s a number of studies began to provide evidence of the *external* validity of the NVQ system, ie the extent to which the claims made were substantiated in terms of outcomes (Callender, 1992; Smithers, 1993; Toye and Vigor, 1994; Spilsbury et al. 1994; Spilsbury et al., 1995; Eraut, et al. 1996; NCVQ/ SCOTVEC, 1996; Robinson, 1996; Winterton and Winterton, 1996; DTZ Pieda Consulting, 1998a, 1998b; Raggatt and Williams, 1999). These provide *secondary* evidence for the overall assessment of the system in respect of the claims identified through analysis of policy dissemination and advocacy, and of practice advocacy documentation. In so far as the claims made may be taken as predictive, or quasi-predictive, they may be treated as hypotheses which may be tested by the external evidence.

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19 In the sense of outcomes in terms of numbers gaining qualifications, and consequent results in terms of work performance and organisational outcomes.

4.4 Conceptual analysis of learning and competence

Whilst the methods detailed above provide empirical grounding for a positive critique of the conventional model, in themselves they cannot provide definitive adjudication on the model's epistemic validity. For this, the key terms must be subject to conceptual analysis. This will be undertaken using the methods of linguistic philosophy, in the tradition of Wittgenstein[20], Austin and Ryle, particularly in their concern to overcome the tendency for conceptual confusion to arise because of 'systematic ambiguity'. That is, a verbal expression, whilst have stable meaning in a particular context, may have a somewhat different, but connected, meaning in a different context (Flew, 1979). Whilst in ordinary language use, where a verbal expression is used for an 'untechnical concept' (Ryle, 1954) we usually have no difficulty with such ambiguity, problems may arise where we use the expression for a 'technical concept'. Such problems arise from an inadequate examination of the way that language is actually used. As Austin points out, often what *appear* to be descriptive statement are better understood as performing other tasks within the social practice of language use (Austin, 1953). Recognition that language is a social practice, that utterances and texts are used to *do* things, can help us to avoid the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' about which Wittgenstein warned (1953: 109).

Wittgenstein refers to the type of investigation he engages in as 'grammatical', which

> "... sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between forms of expression in

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20 ie the later work of Wittgenstein.

> different regions of language. - Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called 'analysis' of our forms of expression, for the process is something like one of taking a thing apart."
> (Wittgenstein, 1953: 90)

Wittgenstein uses two metaphors at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* to indicate how we should approach questions of the use of words: language games and tools. The term 'language games' is introduced by Wittgenstein to argue that words have their meaning in relation to the language of the activities being engaged in, "the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven" (Wittgenstein, 1953: 7), just as a particular chess piece has meaning in relation to its role the game of chess (op. cit.: 31). Moreover, argues Wittgenstein, there is no purpose served in searching for some common meaning to cover the various uses of a word; rather, just like the term 'game' there is only 'family resemblance' between such uses (op.cit. 67). Wittgenstein also invites us to "think of the tools in a tool-box":

> "there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. - The function of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.
> (And of course there are similarities.)
> Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly."
> (op. cit.:11)

In analysing the concepts of learning and competence we shall therefore consider what *different language games* are being played when the terms 'learning' and 'competence', and cognates, are used in *different* settings.

One particular area of potential conceptual confusion over the terms 'learning' and 'competence' arises from the fact that these are not empirically observable. It is tempting, therefore, to postulate some non-physical realm in which competence may be said to exist (as a state) and learning to take place (as an activity); the main

candidate is that of 'the mind'. In order to address this, we shall use the methods adopted by Ryle (1949), whose attack on the 'dogma of the ghost in the machine' was an attempt to clarify the nature of 'mental talk'. In particular, we shall apply the approach he uses to analyse terms which are used in 'talking about' *dispositions* to examine 'competence', and *(mental) occurrences* to examine 'learning' (as a supposed activity).

The work of Ryle and of Wittgenstein, whilst being philosophical, clearly brings them close to social scientific analysis[21]. The implications will be addressed in the arguments for reframing our understanding of learning and competence. However, it is the *methods* of linguistic philosophy that will be used in the attempt to engage in *analysis* of the *concepts* of learning and competence. These primarily consist is taking examples of particular uses of the terms, seeking to understand how they would normally be understood. For this, alternative ways of attempting to formulate a particular utterance (or item of text) are presented[22], to ascertain to what extent the alternative would serve the same use, or what qualifications (eg exceptions, restrictions etc) or supplementary utterances would be needed. In this way, the 'perplexing' (Austin, 1962) character of the words 'learning' and 'competence', because of their use in *different* language games, will hopefully be able to clarify their meaning with respect to the key issues under examination in this thesis.

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21 That is, the arguments over social-epistemological concerns may be seen as having social-ontological implications. Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly in respect of *rule-following*, was developed by Winch (1958) and later by Coulter (1989) in terms of the implications for sociological analysis; it has more recently been significantly influential in some of the developments within *discursive psychology* (eg Shotter, 1993).

22 Ryle refers to this as 'systematic restatement' (Ryle, 1951).

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described and presented the rationale for the investigative methods adopted for this thesis in developing a positive critique of the orthdodox model of learning and competence. The critique will focus on two areas of implementation of the conventional model, ie the skills agenda in higher education and the Management Charter Initiative's approach to managerial competence. A multiple-methods strategy is adopted, using both primary and secondary empirical materials, and conceptual analysis methods, to subject the conventional model to critical analysis. From this analysis, it will be argued that an alternative approach is warrantable; that alternative approach, based on meta-theoretical foundations from relational social theories, will then be examined using the primary empirical materials from the sources previously used in the critique of the conventional model.

The next chapter will begin the critique of the conventional model, subjecting the claims made for it to empirical analysis.

Chapter 5

Competence, Skill and the Experience of Transitions:

Testing the Conventional Model

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 explained the concern of this thesis with the critique of what we have termed the 'conventional model of learning and competence'. That model may be seen to underpin both policy developments and recommendations for educational practice, the 'learning and competence agenda', in respect of 'higher levels', particularly higher education and management education, training and development (METD). We noted in chapter 2 two different approaches to the notion of competence, that of competency analysis in various forms and that of the occupational standards approach as adopted in the development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The 'skills agenda' (Fallows and Steven, 2000) within higher education, particularly but not solely in respect of notions of 'employability' for graduates, may be regarded as generally following the competency analysis approach, ie the identification of attributes and characteristics (usually termed 'key skills' or 'transferable skills') of individuals which are deemed to be required in graduate employment.

This chapter will begin the critique of the conventional model by examining the evidence presented through interviews with individuals who have undergone the transition into relevant occupational positions, ie as managers and/or into employment as graduates. If, as the conventional model would claim, such transitions involve issues of competence and skills, we might reasonably expect such individuals to make

reference to these in discussing their transitions. That is, this chapter will begin the critique of the conventional model by examining the extent to which its depiction of the relationship between the educational and the occupational contexts adequately reflects the nature of such relationship *as expressed by individuals making the transition between these contexts*.

A number of key questions will be posed, and the findings from analysis of interview transcripts will be presented in response. First, the transcripts are analysed to determine the extent to which the language of competence, skill and learning was used by the interview respondents in their depiction of the key events and issues in relation to their transitions into their current occupational positions and settings. Secondly, the '*orderliness*' of the conventional model of learning and competence will be contrasted with the *complexity* of the lived experience of the graduates and novice managers interviewed. Thirdly, insofar as the advocacy of the conventional model claims to be *predictive*[1], we shall consider the extent to which, in contrast, the experience of transition is marked by both *contingency and choice*.

5.2 Graduates' vocabulary and employability

In chapter 2, we saw that whilst the notions of 'transferable' or 'key skills' have come to take a central place in policy discussions of graduate employability, this has largely taken place since the mid-1980s. More recently, such terms do appear to have taken a more significant role in graduate recruiters' descriptions of the attributes and characteristics of the type of individual they seek. Moreover, the notions of such skills have become key elements in a number of initiatives in higher education for

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1 This follows from the nature of advocacy, that is, those who advocate the conventional model implicitly claim that by following its precepts certain desired outcomes will result.

more than a decade. It might therefore be anticipated that graduates themselves would use such terms in their descriptions of their transitions into graduate employment.

However, on a straightforward word count of the transcripts, it is clear that the terms, and various word forms related to 'competence' and to 'learn'[2] do *not* figure as significant items in the vocabulary of the interviewees, in discussing their transitions into employment. Table 5.1 shows the incidence of the relevant terms for each person[3]. No pattern is discernable, except that 'competence' (and other forms) is used *only* in two interviews, and even then it is used only once in each interview. In five cases the count for the key terms is in double figures; however, this applied to *either* 'skill' *or* 'learn' in all but one case. Moreover, examination of the transcripts in which the terms are used more significantly frequently shows that this is arises from the tendency to use the words frequently with a particular passage, ie the usage is 'bunched'. So, for example, the interviewee with reference code GO[4] uses the word 'skills' five times within four consecutive sentences. In the case of GL, five of the usages of forms of the word 'learn' are as within one section of speech and two further sections each have a count of three usages; moreover, five usages of the word 'learning' are as part of the phrase 'learning curve'. These usages are thus not distributed across the narrative, and thus cannot be taken to be significant items in the vocabulary used by these graduates' in their descriptions of their transitions into

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2 The words searched for included 'competent', 'competency', 'skill', 'learner', 'learning', 'learned'; the search included the plural forms of nouns.

3 The table includes *all* usages, whether in relation to self or to others; SB was employed for an organisation which provided training for unemployed people, and the term 'skill' is in many cases used when referring to trainees.

4 This individual was an administrator in the management studies department of an institution of higher education, where it might be anticipated that the discourse of skills and competence was more common than in other arenas.

employment.

Examination of the *usage in context* further undermines the assumption that the notions of learning and skill are significant in such transitions. Generally, the terms 'learn' and 'skill' is used alongside other terms, which appear to have equal significance:

> GD: "A lot of things I have been doing here that are outside my job brief have helped me to get the job at [name of firm], being able to say 'yes, I have experience of that, I know that person, I can do that skill, I understand that area'."
>
> GJ: "They do say that non-graduates can apply if they have sufficient skills or sort of background that might be, might make them quite valuable."
>
> SB: "...going round and talking to the different department managers and trying to learn the system."
>
> SE: "Also I think it's a very good general education because you learn a lot about the history of your own culture and in far more depth than you would at school ..."

The conclusion that seems to be indicated by these findings is that graduates do not normally use the language of skills, competence and learning when describing the key issues involved in their transition into employment[5].

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5 This conclusion would seem to be contradicted by the longitudinal study of a cohort of 1996 graduates (Purcell et al., 1999). However, in that *survey-based* study the use of skills-terms was *explicitly* elicited, rather than arising within the respondents own narratives.

Figure 5-1 **Interviews with Graduates: Word Count on 'Skill', 'Competence' & 'Learn'**

	Number of occurrences		
Ref. Code	**'skill'**	**'competence',**	**'learn', 'learning', etc**
GA	0	0	1
GB	3	0	0
GF	9	0	3
GH	2	0	2
GJ	9	1	5
GL	3	0	23
GO	21	0	4
SA	3	0	2
SB	10	0	12
SC	3	0	6
SD	2	0	8
SE	3	0	6
SL	9	1	1
SN	1	0	4

Figure 5-2 **Interviews with novice managers: Word Count on 'skill', 'competence' & 'learn'**

	number of occurrences		
Ref. Code	**'skill'**	**'competence',**	**'learn', 'learning',**
NA	15	0	5
NB	5	1	13
NC	2	0	8
ND	2	1	13
NE	0	0	7
NG	0	0	11
NH	2	0	2
NJ	0	2	7
NK	7	0	8
MA	8	0	9
MB	1	1	0
MC	0	0	1
MD	1	0	2
ME	3	0	2
MF	12	0	7
MG	2	2	1
BA	5	0	3
BB	5	0	3
BC	0	0	0
BD	1	0	0
BE	1	0	3
BF	2	0	3
BG	3	0	0

5.3 Novice managers's vocabulary

In similar manner, content analysis of transcripts of interviews with novice managers (see table 5-2), shows very limited usage of the terms 'skill', 'competence' and 'learn', and various related word formations. As with the analysis of the transcripts of interviews with graduates, no particular pattern can be discerned. It is particularly noticeable that the term 'competence' is used by only five of the novice managers, which suggests that the term is not used within their organisational contexts in relation to significant issues concerning their managerial performance or ability.

In the cases where the interviewee *has* used one of the terms considerably more times than most other interviewees, there are, as with the graduates, particular features of such usage. In the case of NA, of the 15 incidents of 'skill', four consist of the phrase 'interpersonal skills' and five are in the phrase 'interviewing skills'. Similarly, MF uses the phrase 'communication skills' on four of the 12 occasions of the use of the term 'skills'; the phrase 'people skills' is also used on another occasion. NB uses each of the words 'learnt', 'learning' and 'learn' within two adjacent sentences, and three more instances of word forms from 'learn' in another section, accounting for six of the 13 instances.

As with the interviews with graduates, examination of the *usage in context* indicates that the novice managers do not use the terms in the same way as the conventional model suggests. NB uses the term 'learn', and other word forms from that stem, in the sense of some specific learning and also in a more general sense:

> "...if I actually sat down and said 'Well, in this situation I used X skill that I'd learnt at college' - I don't think I could do that."

> "When I was doing the diploma I was learning a new job, but I was doing the right job and I felt very comfortable with it."

Often the term 'skills' is used as a general term for *types of activity*; this is particularly the case with 'communication skills':

> MF: "Sometimes just knowing from experience is the only way to learn: handling customers, organising meetings, general communication skills ..."
> "Communication skills, dealing with people and managing your team, organisational skills."

The term 'skills' is sometimes used broadly, to indicate what a qualification points to:

> NK: "So I just thought this will be a good qualification to round up my experience, you know, my skills. I think that will give me a very broad view, you know - very broader than in-depth knowledge on management."

Thus, as with the graduates, the novice managers who were interviewed do not appear to be using the language of learning, competence and skills in the manner suggested by the conventional model.

5.4 Complex lives

The practitioner literature on recruitment and selection presents the process in rational-technical terms, in which the employers' actions are given a privileged role in the exposition of the process[6]. A variety of methods are deployed in order to attract appropriate applicants and to judge between them[7], not least the inclusion, in person specifications, of requirements that applicants have certain educational or training qualifications. MCI presents the management standards as being useful in recruitment[8]; employers, it is purported, seek graduates with transferable / key skills (AGR, 1995; Harvey, et al., 1997; CVCP, 1998). Little attention is given in the

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6 See, for example, textbook literature such as Wright and Storey (1997) and Torrington and Hall (1998)

7 Such techniques have been subjected to Foucauldian analysis, as rendering individuals as 'objects of knowledge' (see Rose, 1990; Hollway, 1984, 1991; Townley, 1994)

8 See, eg, *Management Standards Implementation Pack*, page (MCI, 1991b: 3)

literature to the experience of individuals *becoming* managers and graduates-in-employment, and the extent to which such experience matches the systematic, rational-technical process which is depicted. The analysis of interview transcripts would suggest that the experience is much more complex and complicated than is allowed for in the employer-focussed model of recruitment and selection.

The complications of the lives of the graduates and novice managers may be best illustrated by a set of selected narrative accounts.

5.4.1 The Graduates' Stories

Graduate SA: 'Making something of my life'

SA graduated in 1994, with a degree in Business Economics from a new university in the London area. He had no clear idea what he wanted to do, just a general idea of working in sales and marketing. After several months of writing 20-30 job applications per week, without success, he was persuaded by his parents to travel to Pakistan to visit relatives there. This, he says, was "the most intense six weeks I've spent". The poverty and deprivation made him realise the benefits and opportunities available in the UK. He was affected by the wishes of his relatives for him and his family to succeed. This led him to decide to 'make something of my life, to make a difference'.

Initially he took a short computer course to remedy what he saw as an area in which he was lacking. He then saw the opportunity to take a business course for unemployed graduates, in another city. After some difficulty seeking a placement after the course, he eventually found one with a black training provider. This got him involved in community economic development field. He began to apply for jobs in the field, and was offered a

post as policy officer with a London-based black training and campaigning organisation. The post was not specifically advertised as being for a graduate; however, the other employees are all graduates.

Initially, he was very unsure about whether he could do the job. Despite saying that he would take his time to settle in, he threw himself into his work. "Every day it would be like I felt I had to prove myself to be in this job." He is now more settled, has a sense of 'equilibrium' in his life. He has strong commitment to the values of community-led economic development.

Graduate SB: Leaving a traditional 'graduate job':

SB graduated in 1996, with an Oxbridge mathematics and science degree. She chose to take these subjects 'for love of the subject really, not as a career path'. During her first year at university, she sought advice from the university careers service and undertook a psychometric test. The personnel field was suggested as an appropriate career; this also happens to be her father's profession. She applied to various companies for an opportunity for work experience, and spent a week shadowing the personnel director of a building society. Towards the end of her second year at university, she applied to the company for a summer job, and worked there for eight weeks in the personnel department. In her final year, she applied to a number of large companies, seeking a place in their graduate recruitment and training schemes. She had an offer from a major grocery retailer, which she accepted. Following the initial induction and training period, she was placed in charge of the counters section of the store to which she had been posted. She found that she was working very long hours, because of the need to cover for staff shortages. The merchandising, display and selling parts of the job did not interest her. She did not welcome the prospect of 3 years

working in such an environment, moving from one department to another, before she would be able to move on to personnel work at head office. After about 9 months, she decided she would leave. She started applying for jobs, was interviewed for the second company to which she applied, and was offered the job. She resigned her job that afternoon, which was the beginning of her holiday, and started her new job two days later.

Her new employer is a training company, providing training through TEC funding for people who are unemployed. There are 24 employees. Her post is that of placement consultant, finding client companies to take trainees on work placement and monitor the trainees on placement. She had applied for a post of course administrator. This had been advertised as 'an ideal first job for a graduate seeking to go into personnel'; however, at the interview, the business manager discussed the placement consultant post and offered it to her. Most of her colleagues are graduates in their first jobs.

She is successful in her job, and is the only consultant that reliably gains commission for the income she brings to the company. She attributes this to the way she has organised her own system for recording trainee placements in client companies, so that accurate invoices can be sent for all placements. Her experience in her first job has made her 'more determined' to be organised. She drew up guidelines for trainees, to ensure good relations with client companies. She achieves a high level of repeat business. Her boss regularly "bounces ideas" off her.

Her experience in her first job has been useful in terms of her confidence: 'if I can handle that I can handle anything really'; a colleague in her first job is rather in awe of the manager, "scared" to ask for advice.

She is undertaking a personnel management course, and has just

started to look for jobs with wider personnel work, preferably in a large company.

Graduate SC: From secretary to project manager

SC obtained a Social Policy and Administration degree in 1992. Unsure of what she wanted to do, she chose public relations 'out of a hat'. She read about PR and began applying for jobs in the field. However, she began to question the appropriateness of choosing a career in such a way, and whether she did really want to do PR work. She had registered with recruitment consultants, and was offered an interview with the organisation for which she now works. The post, as secretary, was not advertised as being specifically for a graduate, but she believes that the boss did want a graduate.

She took the job intending to stay for just a short time. She hated the work, often refusing to do some tasks set by her boss. She saw the work that was being done by a couple of colleagues, a few years older than her, and wanted to do work like them. As she typed her boss's file notes, she was often the first to see his thinking on various matters. She asked if she could take on certain items to develop as projects, and so was able to get "a few tasty, juicy" projects.

She was seen as successful in these and other projects. She dropped the secretarial side of her job after about a year; the two colleagues, whose work she aspired to, have now left and so her current role incorporates an amalgam of their responsibilities.

She is very pro-active, "has ideas all the time", juggles many activities, and is also very active outside work. She describes herself as a

"big fish in a small pond". She has considerable interaction with politicians, meets with senior executives in companies, organises events. This impresses friends and acquaintances.

She feels she's proven herself, but is now somewhat confined in her current job. She anticipates moving in the near future, but does not yet have definite plans.

5.4.2 Managers' stories

MG: From uncertain student to young manager

MG initially left school after A levels and worked in the Bank of England. She was unsure what degree course she wished to study, so decided to go to work. After working there for a time, she recognised that, as a woman, her career prospects were limited. After two years, she decided that she should move, but realised that her qualifications would mean going into another "boring""job, and decided to study for a degree.

She gained a BA Business Studies and now works as a product development manager for a state-owned commercial organisation. She had also been offered a job with the Foreign Office, but wanted a job which gave her more freedom and the opportunity to take decisions.

Although her job has the word 'manager' in its title, she does not directly manage staff. She deals with internal departments and can delegate task to staff in those departments, but has no authority to discipline them. However, she does hold a budget and can specify the work that she commissions. She also deals with external suppliers. She had hoped to go into marketing; her current job is "more operational", but has a marketing aspect to it.

Her previous boss very much left her on her own, but her new boss is

more involved. She feels able to approach him on work matters, and he provides guidance but in a maner which leaves her to take the decisions. She finds it "quite frightening" that she has as much responsibility so soon, and finds herself being stretched. However, she finds that others see her as confident.

She has ambitions to progress within a managerial career, but not at the expense of changing her personal style.

BF: Teacher or manager?

BF is director of studies for art at a secondary school who has special responsibilities for developing a wider set of activities and provision. He has a degree in Art, then took a PGCE before entering the teaching profession. Prior to joining the school he was deputy head of department at another school. His job at the current school was initially that of a "fairly traditional head of department", but that has changed over the time he has been in post. He has responsibilities for managing resources and people, and a small budget. He expresses some ambivalence about whether to describe his job as managerial. Coming from a "strong socialist" background, when younger he saw issues of management and labour in "black and white", but this has moderated over the years and particularly in having managerial responsibilities.

He sees his career in terms of possibly moving into the "upper tier of management", but is reluctant to move away from involvement in subject specific curriculum matters. He certainly would not see himself transferring into a managerial role outside of teaching.

His views on how to manage come mainly from his own experience.

He has attended some middle management training sessions would not call that 'formal' management training. He states that he 'skimmed' (but did not 'actually read') one book on management[9], on the recommendation of a friend.

5.4.3 Ordered development vs complex lives

These summary narratives of the lives of graduates and managers indicate that their real-life experience is very different from the conventional models' representation of the relationship between competence and occupational trajectory. They thus warrant the development of the alternative perspective, which *can* take account of such complex trajectories, which will be undertaken in chapters 8 and 9 of this thesis.

5.5 Contingency and chance

Further challenge to the 'orderliness' of the conventional model lies in its assumption of predictability, that decisions about anticipated future performance can be justified on the basis of some form of assessment of competence or skills. In addition to the complexity of the lives of graduates and novice managers, depicted above, there was often references to the role of chance, contingency, luck in the occupational opportunity for the individual and the decision they took.

GJ: "I'd actually been firing off random applications in no structured fashion whatsoever, and this is one that just happened to come back at a good time."

GL: "Well I put it down to luck. I know that there were a number of applications."

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9 The book referred to was 'Up the Organization' by the former Chief Executive Officer of Avis, the car rental firm (Townsend, 1971); the book takes an iconoclastic view of much traditional organizational management practice.

MG: "I suppose I am on equal par with some, but with others I seem to have progressed quicker. Now I don't know whether that is based on luck but they don't, not all of them seem to have as much responsibility..."

SB: "I think a lot of it is down to luck to some extent because I'm lucky because I took over some quite, you know, a couple of good companies from the girl that I succeeded."

SN decided to give up her job as a graduate management trainee, after nine months, with a major retail supermarket group, and was able to start in a new job immediately:

SN: "I had a job to start. I finished on the Friday and started the job on the Monday, I was very lucky."

In the case of BA (a deputy headteacher), a key opportunity arose when the head of careers took maternity leave and the headteacher asked him to take over temporarily; however, the head of careers did not return and so BA continued. He states that

BA: "I've never been entirely certain why he picked me but I've always been eternally grateful to him for doing so, because I think, had he not done that, then I would've jogged along quite happily teaching science but wouldn't have thought about doing anything else."

Such contingency and chance in the careers of these graduates and novice managers does not sit easily with the mode of framing the key issues by the conventional model of learning and competence. Adherents to the conventional model might argue that the notions of competence and key skills may provide greater orderliness to the process of seeking and gaining suitable employment, that the randomness of chance may be reduced. However, that would be a claim, and responsibility for its empirical demonstration lies with the conventional model of learning and competence. What can be seen from the empirical evidence presented here is that the conventional model of learning and competence provides a poor account of the process under study.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the realities of individuals' transitions from educational settings to occupational settings, as expressed in interviews conducted to explore such issues. The conventional model of learning and competence claims to explain the key elements by which undergraduates may be prepared for graduate employment, expressing these in terms of 'transferable skills', 'personal competences', 'key skills', or other similar words and phrases. Similarly, those who enter managerial positions may be prepared best, according to the conventional model, through assessment of competence and certification by a National Vocational Qualification, established according MCI standards. Yet what was found from the interviews is that graduates in employment and novice managers was that they did not express their experience in terms of the key notions of the conventional model. We may therefore conclude that *the conventional model does not adequately map the key empirical matters which are of relevance.*

Protagonists for the conventional model may point out, with some validity, that such findings are based on a limited set of interviews and thus do not provide a sufficient basis for rejecting the conventional model. Other research, conducted on a larger scale, *may* provide supportive evidence. In the next chapter we shall examine the existing *secondary* evidence to determine whether or not the claims made for the conventional model are supported. It will be argued that, in fact, the evidence does *not* support the claims made for the model. This will provide the basis for the analysis of the *concepts* which are central to the conventional model, which will be undertaken in chapter 7.

Chapter 6

Investigating the Conventional Model:

Promises and Performance

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter considered the primary research conducted with novice managers and graduates entering employment, in relation to the conventional model of learning and competence. It was found that the model did not provide an adequate explanation of the accounts provided by such persons, nor was its vocabulary compatible with that which they used in describing their experience. However, proponents for the conventional model might argue that such findings are vitiated by the relatively small number of interviewees. Moreover, the interviewees' own understandings of the processes they underwent may itself by limited or mistaken. It might be argued that the results of the implementation of the model would be capable of evaluation, independently of the perceptions of those individuals who are the 'recipents' of such implementation.

This chapter will therefore examine the claims made for the two main implementations of the conventional model, at 'higher levels': National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) approach to management competence, as devised by the Management Charter Initiative (MCI), and the 'transferable skills' or 'key skills' approach in higher education. Although there are other, organisation-specific approaches to competence (see, eg, Devine, 1990; Boam and Sparrow, 1992; Strebler and Bevan, 1996; Strebler et al.,1997), the MCI's approach has been developed

specifically to be generic, applicable to any manager in any organisation[1]. In contrast, the transferable/ key skills approach is characterised by a multiplicity of lists and frameworks (see Otter, 1997; Drew, 1998; National Key Skills Dissemination Project, 2000).

The investigation will proceed by identifying key claims made for the MCI's standards approach to competence and for the skills agenda in higher education. Such claims will then be compared with empirical evidence. Such evidence will include *direct* evidence, ie the extent to which the claims are justified, and also *indirect* evidence, ie by reference to related studies which would suggest that the claims are justifiable.

The period covered by the documents from which the MCI-related claims are elicited is mostly up until 1992. Until that time the NVQ approach in general was still very much under development, and MCI did not publish the occupational standards for management until late-1990; the evidence on the extent to which the claims could be substantiated or disconfirmed was, of chronological necessity, not yet available[2]. In these early years, there were many critiques of the approach by the Management Charter Initiative and by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, but these were mainly conducted from conceptual and theoretical bases (Ashworth and Saxton, 1990; Canning, 1990; Everard, 1990; Norris, 1991; Stewart and Hamlin, 1992a).

The period covered by the documents regarding the skills approach in higher

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1 eg, "MCI has identified the common core which runs through all managerial jobs, and which is the foundation for the skills which people take with them from one job to another." (Source: MCI Information Exchange, November/ December 1990, p. 3)

2 This investigation will be concerned only with the first set of NVQs in management; these were subject to revision and relaunch in 1997.

education continues into the present, being recently endorsed by the Dearing Committee (NCIHE, 1997) and by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP, 1998). Murphy and Otter (1999) assert that there has been "intensive research and development in the field", and that key skills "must now become an integral part of the learning experience". More widely, key skills are now part of the wider qualifications system, with Government sponsorship; it is most likely, then, that the skills agenda in higher education will continue for some time.

The analysis will first address the MCI approach (sections 6.2 to 6.6), then the skills approach (sections 6.6 to 6.8).

6.2 MCI and Management NVQs

6.2.1 National economic benefits

The context for the introduction of the competence approach to management development is that of the perceived lack of competitiveness of the UK economy relative to other nations (Institute for Manpower Studies, 1984; de Ville, 1986; DE/ DES, 1986; Employment Department, 1988). The implementation of the NVQ approach thus carried the claim, at least implicitly, that this would result in an improvement in such competitiveness. The Foreword to an Employment Department publication as late as 1994 stated that

> "NVQs and SVQs are the hallmarks of a competent workforce and are at the centre of the Government's strategy for ensuring the economic success of the nation through achieving a world-class workforce."
> (ED, 1994: 5)

Earlier, Harrison[3] (1989) had asserted that

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3 Harrison is described as 'a Principal in the Qualifications and Standards Branch of the Training Agency'.

> "As many of these standards and their related NVQs become available, it is becoming clear that they will be able to contribute towards the development of the capabilities of the national workforce and in time will be viewed as 'standards for success'[4]."
> (Harrison, 1989: 24)

Mathews, one of the originators of the method used for developing competence frameworks, asserts

> "The new occupational standards [competence frameworks] which are being developed as the basis for NVQs must eventually be judged not by their appearance or the rhetoric of their introduction but by their effects."
> (Mathews, 1990: 13)

In seeking evidence to make such a judgement, no published research was found to be available which seeks to assess such a claim *at national economic level*; it is most likely none has been undertaken. *If* such research *were* available, and demonstrated the 'success' which Harrison explicitly claims and on which, Mathews asserts, the NVQ approach must be judged, then this would undoubtedly have been given prominent publication.

Moreover, as shown by the human capital literature (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971) and other literature in the economics of education and training (eg Thomas and Simkins, 1987), the difficulties in attempting such research are considerable; a whole set of factors, internally to the national economy and externally, would have to be taken into account in seeking to ascertain the *specific* contribution of *management* certification through the NVQs. Such research would have to be conducted *comparatively*, either in relation to the record of the previous qualifications system, or in relation to such systems in other countries (or both). The *claims made for the economic success* that would arise from implementation of the MCI's approach, and

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4 The phrase 'standards for success' was taken as the title of a promotional video, produced and distributed for no cost by the NCVQ, in 1989.

of the National Vocational Qualifications system *tout court*, remain, and are almost certain to remain, *unproven*.

6.2.2 Business benefits

If the benefits to the national economy cannot be proven, it might still be argued that such benefits might reasonably be inferred from the evidence of benefits to employing organisations[5]. Mathews (1990) argued that there was a need to *evaluate* the outcomes of the introduction of standards (ie competence frameworks for NVQs) for two reasons:

> "1. To examine whether the standards and their development processes are good enough for their purpose and to identify how both may be improved.
> 2. To demonstrate to employers, educators and trainers and others the benefits of adopting and implementing the standards."
> (op.cit.: 10)

Within the established tradition of conventional training literature, there is an emphasis on the importance of evaluation, albeit that this appears to be seldom undertaken in practice (TDLB, 1990: 6). The occupational standards for the training field also emphasise evaluation (TDLB, 1992), such that a candidate for an NVQ in training would be required to demonstrate competence in this aspect of the occupation. Generally, *training* evaluation[6] is presented as capable of being undertaken at different *levels*, the highest level being that of benefit (particularly in financial terms) to the organisation (Hesseling, 1966; Kirkpatrick, 1967; Whitelaw, 1972; Hamblin, 1974). We might therefore reasonably anticipate that the MCI

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5 It would not, however, be valid to argue from firm-level benefit to national economic benefit, given the wide range of factors which have or potentially have an effect on the national economy. This is not pursued here because, as will be demonstrated, the firm-level benefit is not proven.

6 Alternative models of evaluation have been developed, particularly in the educational sphere (Hamilton et al, 1977; Guba and Lincoln, 1981). The conventional model for evaluation of training in business contexts is discussed here simply because the MCI approach claims to be business-based.

approach would be subject to such evaluation; generally, this would be referred to as the 'business benefit' which could then be presented in the 'business case' for NVQs (Fennell, 1992: 26)[7].

There have, in fact, been very few *rigorous* studies concerned with 'the business benefits' of both NVQs generally, and of the MCI's competence approach in respect of management. MCI has published a number of case studies which, it claimed, demonstrated business success for the organisations concerned arising from their use of the MCI standards (MCI undated (a); MCI undated (b); MCI undated (c)). However, these provide no information on the investigative methods adopted, and no detail of the empirical evidence to support the claims made. Such studies cannot be relied upon to provide rigorous support for the claim that the approach gives rise to the business benefits claimed, and the charge of 'Hawthorne effect'[8] is easily mounted and difficult to refute. Most of the rigorous empirical research on NVQs has concerned other issues, including factors affecting take up and use of NVQs (eg Callender, 1992; Spilsbury, et al., 1994; CBI, 1994; Spilsbury, et al., 1995; NCVQ/ SCOTVEC, 1996; Sims and Golden, 1998) and the consequences that arise within the context of their implementation (eg. Bates and Dutson, 1995; Grugulis, 1997). Our concern here is more straightforwardly with the question of *whether*, and *to what extent*, the use of NVQs in management results in superior organisational performance, albeit that determining the answer to such a question may not be

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7 Fennell's article is a review of an Employment Department publication, 'The Guide to the Business Case Framework'.

8 ie, that the effects observed arise from the mere fact that *some* change has been made to normal happenings rather than that the specific intervention has caused the effects to arise. The term originates from the first Hawthorne Studies (Mayo, 1949; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1964), and is usually applied to the problem of the research process itself affecting the behaviour of those who are under observation.

straightforward.

There is, of course, a problem with regard to timescale for any attempt to study the outcomes of the adoption of NVQs in respect of business benefits. Toye and Vigor (1994) studied 15 large employers who had adopted NVQs. The information on 'benefits' was obtained in terms of the views of human resource development managers, who stated that they '*expected*' NVQs to raise standards of performance, ie they did not report *actual* perceived benefits. The main research project was that undertaken by Winterton and Winterton (1996), in which in-depth case studies were conducted with 16 organisations who engaged in what was judged to be competence-based management development, with a view to 'exploring' a set of hypotheses. One of these hypotheses, with which were are here concerned, included that competence-based management development 'leads to identifiable improvements in business performance'. The conclusions reached included that:

> "competence-based management development leads to identifiable improvements in performance; [...]
> the most robust evidence of the business benefits of management development was apparent in organisations in which management development is linked to organisational strategy and where HRD [human resource development] systems and processes are based on the Management Standards."
> (Winterton and Winterton, 1996: 61)

However, there are problems with the research and its findings. The description of the research methodology is very complicated, and the claims made for the findings in relation to the hypotheses are heavily qualified. Of the 16 organisations, only 4 were judged to be using the MCI standards. The authors discuss, in an appendix ('Technical notes on statistical tests') that, because of the lack of access to direct quantitative measures that were consistent between the cases, analysis

of *cardinal data* was not possible. The statistical method used was to test correlations between the *rankings* (ie *ordinal data*) made, on the *judgements* made on the various criteria. There is clearly considerable scope for debating such research in terms of methodology, particularly the assessment of highly varied data and the role of judgements by an 'independent expert'. However, even accepting the project's methodology, there are two key issues which we should consider.

First is the simple point that *correlation is not causation*, which Winterton and Winterton do not address. There may be other explanations of the findings, as derived from statistical analysis, whereby other variables may be considered to be causative of both factors which are deemed to be related. The second point, related to the first, is that there is no reference to the work of Fox and McLeay (1992) who found a strong correlation between business performance (on financial measures) and the extent to which management development was linked with broader human resource management systems and practices, and an even stronger correlation where these were linked with corporate strategy[9]. Winterton and Winterton (1996) give no indication of having considered that their own findings, regarding the correlation between the use of MCI standards coupled with the linking of management development with corporate strategy, might be explained by the intervening variable of the link between management development and other elements in the human resource strategy.

For these reasons, and given the small number of organisations studied, the questions over the role of interpretation of evidence and of judgement in terms of rankings, the Winterton and Winterton (1996) study cannot sustain the claim made.

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9 The study by Fox and McLeahy did not itself focus on *competence-based* management development, and was too early to address the MCI standards.

The claim that the standards approach to competence would give rise to desired business benefits has not been demonstrated.

6.2.3 Individual development

The benefits which, it is claimed, employers should gain from adopting management NVQs as developed by MCI purportedly arise from the results achieved by individuals managers whose competence is attested by the award of such NVQs. Michael Howard, then Secretary of State for Employment, welcoming the launch of the MCI standards, asserted that they would "be invaluable to the individual manager in improving his or her performance" (MCI Information Exchange, November/ December, 1990, p.1). Mathews (1990) stated that

> "Much is pinned on the standards. It is hoped to improve management development processes and to bring about essential changes in the practice of management in UK companies and public administration."

The rationale for introducing NVQs is, after all, to improve the performance of the UK workforce through raising skills levels; and the rationale for MCI is that of improving the performance of *managers* in the UK. Although it may be difficult to show that there are business benefits, and almost impossible to demonstrate economic benefits to the country, at least it ought to be possible to link NVQs with improved managerial performance. Since it is the interests of proponents for management NVQs, especially MCI, we might therefore anticipate that considerable efforts would have been expended to obtain reliable empirical evidence for such a link.

Unfortunately for the NVQ-protagonists, no such evidence is available. As with the issue of business benefits, case studies of individuals are sometimes presented, but with little detailed information about methods of investigation or of other relevant details; these provide little in the way of rigorous evidence that the

approach achieves what is claimed. There are, as far as could be ascertained, no studies which demonstrated improvements in managerial performance that arise specifically from the use of the MCI approach.

That this should be the case is understandable, given that the NVQ system has been *intentionally* designed to separate assessment of competence from the education, training and development processes and activities for bringing about such competence. Thus, the NVQ criteria state that, to be accredited as an NVQ, an award must be "based on assessment of the outcomes of learning, normally arrived at independently of any particular mode, duration or location of learning" (NCVQ, 1995: 6). Mansfield presented the relationship between the concept of competence, the standards, assessment and learning, as shown in figure 6.1 below. Jessup (1991) uses a variation of the diagram to illustrate how

> "both learning and assessment are based on the statements of competence, but are conceptually independent of each other."
> (Jessup, 1991: 19)

Such separation, coupled with the unit-structure and provision for credit accumulation, enables an individual to seek an NVQ *without* undertaking any form of education or training:

> "Practising managers in the past have had to follow academic courses to achieve management qualifications. No account was taken of what they already knew and could do through years of experience and training courses. The development of national standards of competence for managers by MCI means that *all* managers will be able to gain credit towards national qualifications through demonstration of their competence at work: if they can do the job they will not have to re-learn it."
> (MCI, 1991b; emphasis in original)

Thus the NVQ approach does not, in itself, require that an individual *develops* their competence and *improves* their performance, but merely that they be assessed as competent according to the MCI standards.

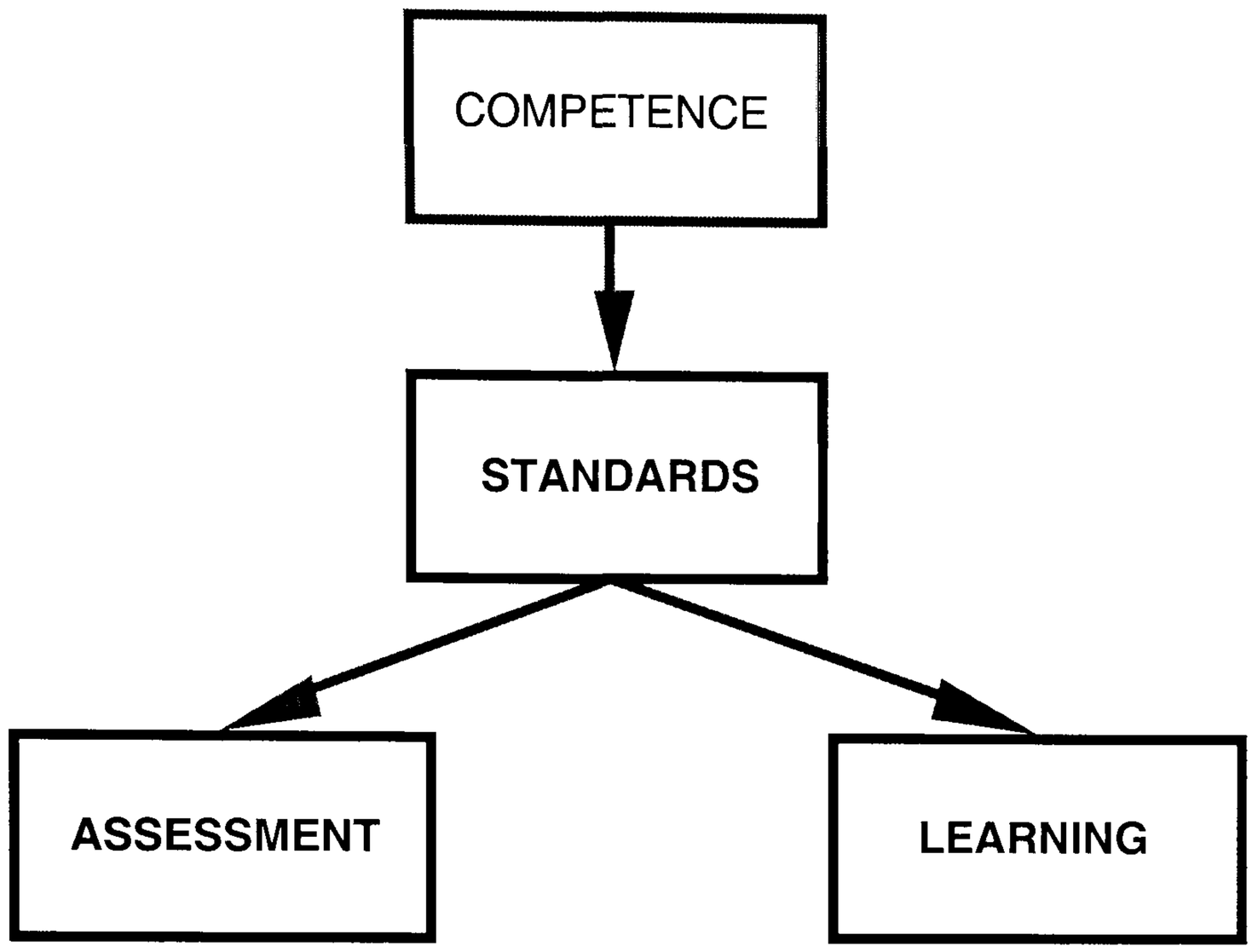

Figure 6.1 Relationship between concepts of competence, standards, assessment and learning (source: Mansfield, 1989a: 30)

The link between NVQs and improvement in performance lies, for MCI protagonists, in the way that the explicit statements of performance requirements, ie the management standards, form the basis on which assessment of competence is undertaken and thus the qualification awarded. Mathews (1990) stated that

> "even the act of making the standards explicit is believed to have profound implications for the performance of managers.
> The formal expression of standards will, it is argued, improve the setting of goals, structuring of feedback, the focus of training and so on."

So, whilst the MCI standards approach allows any individual to be assessed and to be awarded an NVQ *without* undertaking formal education and/ or training, it also may be used for developing a programme of education/ training intended to assist managers to gain the qualification. For MCI, such programmes should be primarily *practical* in orientation:

> "Competence is about effective performance in employment and therefore learning programmes should be devised to develop this competence with the most effective strategies being based upon the real work situation or realistic simulations."
> (MCI, 1991c: p.8)

However, the same assessment regime applies, whereby the individual must provide a portfolio of evidence demonstrating competent performance on each of the elements of competence. It is this emphasis upon assessment that can be seen to raise problems with the attempt to use the management standards for improving performance on the part of individual managers. To explain how these problems arose, it is first necessary to describe the MCI and NVQ assessment approach.

The assessment requirements for an NVQ are that there is *evidence* that the candidate has met the performance standards on *each* of the elements of competence making up *each* of the units of competence, as specified in the occupational standards. Moreover, because the NVQ is an *occupational-generic* award, and not an

organisation-specific award, then the evidence must cover a range of situations in which the performance is specified (in the element of competence), as detailed in the *range indicator* statements. The notion of 'evidence' is central to the NVQ approach to assessment:

> "Assessment may be regarded as the process of collecting evidence and making judgements on whether performance criteria have been met. For the award of an NVQ a candidate must have demonstrated that he or she can meet the performance criteria for each element of competence specified."
> (NCVQ, 1989)

Jessup (1991) argues that this view of assessment as evidence collection presents a 'major conceptual change' for those who have viewed assessment for qualifications in terms of formal 'instruments of assessment' (ie examinations and tests).

> "Other, and more *natural* sources of evidence can be found in performance at work or outside."
> (Jessup, 1991: 48)

NCVQ criteria specify that

> "Performance must be demonstrated and assessed under conditions as close as possible to those under which it would normally be practised."
> NCVQ, 1989)

However, MCI Assessment Guidelines state that the management standards

> "do not call for a strong focus on *direct observation* unlike many of the standards defining the expectations and requirements of occupations involved in particular operations. [...]
>
> Whereas assessment should be normally based firmly in the workplace, direct observation by an assessor is not always possible or desirable in the management context. "
> (MCI, 1991d: 13, 14; emphasis added)

So, in addition to evidence derived from performance at work, the evidence may include 'performance in specially set tasks, questioning on how the manager would handle contingencies ('what if situations') and questioning on why a particular action is or would be undertaken.

Four sources of evidence are listed by MCI in the Assessment Guidelines

(MCI 1991d):

> "
> - products of the manager's daily work;
> - observation - specifically for assessment purposes by line manager or assessor or someone acting on the assessor's behalf;
> - witness testimony - reports from colleagues and others who have knowledge of the instances of work performance from their contact with the candidate;
> - personal report."

The phrase 'products of the manager's daily work' is elaborated as "reports, production schedules, proposals, balance sheets, articles, letters, etc". Witness testimony can be from any of a variety of individuals, eg colleagues, line manager, subordinates, customers. The personal report should include details of the action taken, reflections on actions taken, knowledge of what was done and why, and indication of planning with regard to different circumstances[10]. The MCI literature presents the assessment process as one in which the individual candidate takes the responsibility for presenting for assessment the evidence that they have achieved the standards; the method for doing so is referred to as the 'portfolio approach' (MCI, 1991a). A portfolio is described as a 'folder, file or similar mode of collection' for the evidence to be presented for assessment.

So, to sum up, the assessment approach for a management NVQ involves:

- the individual candidate producing a portfolio of evidence;
- the evidence may take a variety of forms, but must indicate how the individual has met the standards and be primarily based on work performance;
- the individual must be assessed on each element of performance, for each performance criterion and across the range indicators.

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10 The section describing these requirements for the personal report follows immediately after discussion of, and clearly reflects, Kolb's model of the Experiential Learning Cycle (cited as Kolb and Fry, 1975)

We shall now examine how such an approach to assessment has fared in practice.

6.2.4 Problems with assessment

The assessment approach is clearly a much more extensive and elaborate approach than that typically adopted in conventional management education and training (eg through coursework, examinations, project reports etc). There is a high number of elements of competence, performance criteria and range indicators (see table 6.1). For a manager seeking to be assessed as competent for an NVQ, there is obviously a large amount of evidence needed for the portfolio, to cover all the requirements. MCI (1991a) does state that an item of evidence *can* be used for more than one performance criterion and more than one element; however, usually more than one item of evidence would be needed for any element or performance criterion. Consequently, the portfolio has to be structured and presented in a manner in which the items of evidence are cross-referenced with the elements and performance criterion. We should also note that an assessor may make one of three possible assessment decisions: 'competent', 'not yet competent', and 'insufficient evidence'. There is no provision for grading on a scale, nor for 'compensation', ie allowing poor performance in one area to be offset by good performance in another. Moreover, the onus is upon the candidate to provide the relevant evidence, and the assessor is obliged to assess *solely* upon the evidence presented.

Table 6.1 **Numbers of units, elements, performance criteria and range indicators**

	Units	Elements	Performance criteria	Range indicators
MCI level I (NVQ 4)	9	26	163	126
MCI level II (NVQ 5)	10	36	240	166

Reporting an empirical study[11] of the implementation of management NVQs in three companies, Grugulis (1997) indicates a number of problems that arose. Faced with the requirement to provide *a portfolio of evidence*, the managers began to engage in more formal procedures and collect written documentation, on areas of work which hitherto they had conducted with less formality. For example, memos began to be used for even minor items whereas before they would have telephoned or spoken face-to-face. Work activity which could be documented was undertaken, irrespective of the need for or appropriateness of such activity. Two managers appeared to be in a position where they had only to photocopy the contents of their filing cabinets, whilst another, an IT expert, found that he had to devise official procedures relevant only to himself and rendered useless when new computer programs were installed. The need to obtain witness testimony resulted in the candidates in one company, being loath to impose on their colleagues, forming a mutually supporting group to provide each other with such testimony[12].

A typical portfolio, according to Grugulis, consisted of over 200 documents presented in two large A4 ring binders, with the managers in one organisation producing double that amount; she states that NVQ assessors and verifiers

> "regularly told stories of enthusiastic candidates who generated nine or ten ring binders of evidence for their portfolios"
> (Grugulis, 1997: 439).

The assessment approach thus leads to the production of paperwork which reflects

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11 The research project was funded by ESRC, and undertaken during 1993 and 1995. Grugulis states that "examples of good practice in large organisations were deliberately sought out" (p.430).

12 Grugulis recounts the amusing interaction in which the candidates discuss providing testimony for each other on discipline and grievance procedures,whereby they would take turns to sack each other!

what is officially sanctioned, rather than what actually occurs in the managers' work performance.

Nor can the change of behaviours by the managers, in terms of adopting more systematic and formal procedures, be taken as indicators of improvements in performance. The MCI standards are presented as benchmarks for performance, and it was the perception of them as such that resulted in managers conforming in order to achieve the qualification and thus of public acknowledgement of their own abilities.

> "This promotion of the management standards as benchmarks despite the fact that they neither accurately described current practice nor effectively prescribed an ideal type also resulted in a confusion of managerial processes and a mass of paperwork was generated to meet the demands of the portfolios."
> (Grugulis, 1997: 441)

In almost all cases, the new procedures were abandoned soon after completion of the relevant units (of competence).

The situation described in Grugulis' account, if representative of the consequences more generally, may be seen as a damning indictment of the management NVQ approach. She cites, as an indication of the 'real harm' of the approach, the words of one manager:

> "We've just produced a lot of paper and we're wasting a lot of time and it doesn't mean a damn thing to anyone including the individual at the end."
> (p. 442)

We must therefore conclude that the claim that the MCI approach promotes the development of individual managers' abilities to perform more effectively is not proven.

6.2.5 'Capturing' competence

If it is not possible to sustain the claim that MCI's management standards, and the NVQs based upon them, result in identifiable business benefits not attributable to other factors, nor the claim that they lead to improvements in managerial

performance, it might yet be possible to argue that they do, at least, describe effectively the nature of managerial competence. Writing in MCI's official journal (MCI Information Exchange, November/ December 1989) Fennell wrote:

> "The puzzle is, how can [management] be defined?
> That is the question which MCI has been asking itself (and a lot of other people in industry and commerce) over the last few months. Now some answers are starting to emerge." (p.6)

He continues by stating that draft occupational standards were to be published shortly which were "based on the realities of management and distilled and approved by industry experts"; this gave them the "quality of authenticity".

> "The research undertaken on behalf of the MCI states that the key purpose of management is to 'sustain and enhance the performance of the organisation to achieve its objectives'."
> (ibid.)

This, asserted Fennell, "applies to all levels of management and represents the common mission of management in every organisation at every level" (ibid.).

Fennell[13] makes two main claims of interest here:

1) the draft framework of managerial competence has been produced through research;

2) the draft framework is based on the realities of management.

The second point was discussed in chapter 3, where we considered the debate on managerial behaviour. We shall here discuss Fennell's first claim, that MCI Standards are 'research-based'. No indication is given of what is meant by 'research' in relation to the development of the competence framework; however, given the reference to 'authenticity' and 'the realities of management', the intended message seems to be that that the framework is based on *empirical* research. However, such a claim cannot

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13 Fennell was at that time the Editor of 'Competence & Assessment', the quarterly bulletin of the Employment Department Training Agency Standards Methodology Branch (source: Competence & Assessment, issue 7, winter 1989). The MCI Information Exchange was the MCI's official journal distributed to its members. We can, then, take Fennell's statements as authoritative.

be sustained, because the framework was produced through the method of functional analysis (MCI, 1989a).

As noted in chapter 2, functional analysis was the method adopted at an early stage by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, and the Standards Methodology Branch, for developing the competence frameworks for *all* occupations in which NVQs were to be developed (Jessup, 1991; NCVQ, 1995; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996). To begin the development of 'standards' in a particular occupation area, a 'lead body' would be established which was intended to be representative of that occupational area. Consultants trained in the application of functional analysis would work with the members of the lead body, to seek to develop the comprehensive set of occupational standards, which could then form the basis of the National Vocational Qualifications for that occupational area.

It is clear from the various published descriptions[14] that functional analysis is primarily undertaken as an abstract exercise, rather than being based on empirical data. Mansfield and Mitchell (1996) explain that the process of functional analysis

> "starts with the identification of a key purpose statement which attempts to describe the unique contribution which an industry or occupation makes within the economy..." (p.105)

We should note that they do not state that *the key purpose* is identified; rather it is *a statement* which is 'identified'. The word 'identification' is being used equivocally here; what is presumably meant is that a *statement* of key purpose is *'contructed'*,

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14 The first sources were published in 1989. An official source was the second of the set of eight Guidance Notes issued by the Training Agency to support the development work on frameworks of competence for NVQs (TA, 1989). Mitchell (1989) discusses the method, stating that it was still 'very much in a developmental stage'. Jessup (1991) states that the method 'is now advocated'. By 1995, NCVQ Criteria and Guidance states that 'The NVQ statement of competence derives from an analysis of functions within the area of competence to which it relates" (p.17). Two of the key developers published what may now be taken as a definitive guide (Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996).

'*devised*', or '*produced*'. This is confirmed by a later statement:

> "The key purpose statement [...] is subject to comment and change during the development process. Consequently it is often quite acceptable to work with an initial rough draft, accompanied by a commentary which provides a rationale for the statement."
> (op.cit, p.107)

Mansfield and Mitchell continue their explanation of functional analysis by describing the process of analysis. This starts with the production of 'key areas' which are derived by answering the question 'in order to achieve the key purpose of the occupational sector, what are people expected to be able to do?' (p.107). From the discussion which then follows in the text, it is clear that the question is answered by those who are involved in developing the occupational standards (ie consultants and members of the lead body), *not* by empirical investigation of what happens in the occupation. The next stage of analysis repeats the question but in relation to each of the areas which had been derived from the first stage; this involves the use of

> "the two methods of functional analysis:
> - the application of **disaggregation rules;**
> - the process of **iteration**."
> (p.114)

Iteration is explained (p. 123) as offering the opportunity to retrace the analysis process and *to adjust the whole framework*, (for various reasons). Mansfield and Mitchell sum up their description of functional analysis as follows:

> "The product of the process of functional analysis is a functional map. The functional map is a broad representation of an occupational sector and is the outcome of a *decision-making process*. It starts with the *definition* of the key purpose [...] From this very broad *statement* a number of *substatements* are generated, by a process of analysis, which represent outcomes which must be achieved to account fully for the key purpose."
> (p.138 (emphasis added)

At no point in their description do the authors[15] provide any indication that the process

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15 They were authors of functional analysis (with others) as well as authors of their book.

of functional analysis involves *empirical research* on what managers actually do[16]. In practice, the 'Standards Project' did involve *consultation*[17] with a variety of audiences, but this was conducted *after* production of the draft framework. The process of functional analysis is clearly an abstract method for developing *statements* which may purport to represent the realities of managerial work, undertaken away from the arena of managerial work. *To claim this as research is clearly not supportable*, as evidenced by the writings of those most closely involved with the development of the method[18].

6.2.5 MCI and Management NVQs: Conclusion

The claims made for the MCI approach to competence, and the NVQs in management based on that approach, have been examined in the foregoing sections. Moving down in terms of levels of scope, from the purported benefits to the national economy to more modest claims that the management standards 'capture' the nature of management competence, no reliable evidence has been found to support such claims. It must therefore be concluded that, when introduced, the MCI approach was

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16 Or, as in Boyatzis' (1982) discussion, what distinguishes those who are judged *competent* or *'superior'* managers do.

17 Workshops and interviews were held, then a 37 page questionnaire was distributed; the questionnaire reproduced the draft framework of competences, then *for each* of 74 elements of competence, with range statements and performance criteria, asks 'is this element needed by the manager?', 'does this range of situations illustrate the appropriate context?, and (for the performance criteria) 'is this something you would expect of such a manager?'. No record is given on response rate, nor indication of the extent of agreement on the answers. (Source: 'Management Competences Project: Questionnaire: Draft Standards for Junior Manager', MCI, 1989)

18 Functional analysis has been subject to critical analysis elsewhere (Stewart and Hamlin, 1992; Stewart and Sambrook, 1995) and Mansfield has replied to some criticisms (Mansfield, 1993; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1996) (see discussion above, chapter 3, section 3.4). These focus on the validity of the method, which is not our primary concern here; the argument made here is simply that the description of the method, by its originators, runs counter to Fennell's claim that the management competence framework is *research-based.*

not evidence-based; moreover, after several years of its implementation, the required empirical evidence to warrant its acceptance is still lacking.

6.3 Key skills in higher education

6.3.1 Benefits to employer

The key skills, or transferable skills, approach in higher education has also been advocated in terms of the benefits to the economy, in the context of increasing and global competition (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995; NCIHE, 1997; Drew, 1998). However, as with the MCI approach to managerial competence, demonstrating that the approach leads to the economic benefits claimed is virtually impossible; *the claim remains therefore at the level of the rhetoric of policy advocacy*.

This section will move directly to the next level down in the hierarchy of presumed effects, that of business benefit to the employing organisation. The question of evidence, here, is more straightforward than in the case of the MCI approach: there is *no evidence* that the adoption of a transferable skills approach in an institution of higher education leads to benefits for an organisation which employs a graduate from such an institution. This is not surprising, as it would be difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate such benefits arising unequivocally from the fact that (normally) a particular employee, or even a group of such employees, had undergone some specified aspect of their undergraduate course. Moreover, as will be discussed below (section 6.3.3), unlike the case of the MCI approach, there are a variety of models, frameworks and lists of 'skills' used by different universities, each such institution apparently deciding to develop its own bespoke approach. Even if it were possible to obtain evidence, and even if such evidence were obtained, that did show that there was a relationship between a particular institution's approach to skills development

and assessment and the performance of the organisations which recruited its graduates, there would be a question as to whether it was reasonable to *generalise* from that particular approach to skills approach more broadly. Such difficulties render the possibilities of conducting such research virtually negligible.

6.3.2 Key skills and graduates' work

For similar reasons, it seems almost impossible to obtain empirical evidence to show that graduates' work performance is better than it would otherwise have been, as a result of undergoing skills development and assessment. There is no feasible way of determining what *would have been* the performance, without the effects of the skills development and assessment, particularly in the case of the vast majority of graduates who had not been employed in the type of work they now have prior to undertaking their degree studies. No UK university has taken the step of *experimenting* with key skills provision, by selectively providing and withholding such provision from different cohorts of students in order to make comparisons between their performance as graduates; it is politically unlikely that any would take such action. In order to investigate the claim that skills development and assessment results in the desired work performance of graduates, it would be necessary to take a more indirect approach.

It might therefore be argued that the claim is reasonable because employers state that graduates require such skills for the type of work for which they recruit them, and that this fact may be taken as indicating that the desired performance might reasonably be expected to result. Whilst there has been a number of published research studies which claim that employers do express the need for key skills, closer examination raises doubts about such claims. In chapter 2, we noted that the

beginnings, in policy terms, of the transferable /key skills approach in higher education can be placed in the joint statement in 1984 by NAB and UGC. Yet an empirical study of graduates in employment *published in the following year*[19] does not indicate that employers used the term 'skills' in describing 'what else', besides a degree, they require of a graduate recruit (Roizen and Jepson, 1985).

Harvey et al (1992) report on research which, it is claimed, indicated the relative importance of 15 qualities and skills. However, the methods adopted pose serious problems, as the list was presented to the respondents and does nor reflect their own usage. A warning on this arises from the research of Mangham and Silver (1986) on managerial skills, who state that employers generally "do not appear to have the concepts to describe managerial competency", reporting that

> "Many of the individual replies were only secured **after** considerable prompting; the qualities, attributes and skills of effective performers **do not** appear to be common currency."
> (Mangham and Silver, 1986: 32; emphasis in original)

No conclusions can therefore be drawn about employers' requirements for skills on the basis of a research method which is based on the assumption that these terms represent employers' own understandings. Moreover, there is the possibility that the use of the term skills, which is a concept for *analysis*, in the *data collection* methods of research, has resulted in employers using skills terms in articulating their perceived requirements of graduate recruits, thus '*contaminating*' the data[20]. The use of the word 'skill' would not indicate that they use the term with the same meaning as that used by

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19 No indication is given as to when the research was conducted, but it is reasonable to assume that this was during 1983-84.

20 That is, if the term 'skill' is used by the researchers, *prior to* its use, if at all, by employers then we can never be confident that the language of skills is used by employers outside of the research context. We saw in chapter 5 that, with few exceptions, that the graduates interviewed did not use the term to any significant extent.

protagonists for the skills approach in higher education (cf Hirsh and Bevan, 1988)[21].

This seems to be supported by a close examination of a study of 'graduates' work' (Harvey, et al, 1997); the quotations from employers seem to show that, by and large, they *do not* express their requirements in terms of 'skills' (nor even 'attributes'). Rather, they tend to talk about the 'type of graduate' they seek, and the 'kind of work' to be undertaken. Thus, for example, the discussion of what Harvey et al. (1997: pp.66-67) refer to as 'self-skills' (cf Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995, on 'self-reliance skills') is presented with five extracts from interviews *none of which* include the word 'skills', but do include the following phrases: "I actually expect them to self-start...", "I don't want somebody who is extremely bright...", "I need someone who is single-minded...", "we want somebody who has a certain tenacity...", "you need people to be very conscientious...", "you don't want people coming in and using initiative 100% ...". Even where the term 'skills' is used by employers, it is situated and contextualised rather than used in the generic sense of the conventional model. Thus, for example, the human resource manager of a large pharmaceutical manufacturer , while saying the "verbal and scientific communication skills have become even more important", continues:

> "Most of our review of projects is done in an open meeting, so researchers need to be able to communicate verbally. [...] Work is now presented via verbal skills, rather than by written report."
> (Harvey et al., 1997: p.70)

Similarly, another manager in a financial institution says:

> "People will need to be better communicators and have better communication skills, not just written, but in terms of listening and being

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21 Hirsh and Bevan investigated the use of skills terms in respect of management effectiveness/ competence. They concluded that "...if we ask the question 'is there a shared language for management skills?', the answer seems to be 'yes' at the level of expression but 'no' at the level of meaning." (Hirsh and Bevan, 1988: 45)

> able to modify what you are saying to the audience that you are delivering that communication to."
> (ibid.)

The language of skills as used within the key/ transferable skills approach, it may be argued, is not the way that graduate employers normally articulate what they require in prospective recruits and actual employees, but is more an artificial vocabulary imposed on discussions about the education-employment relationship and interpretatively overlaid on the data.

6.3.3 Skills as explanatory of performance

As a final attempt to find support for the claims made for the skills approach in higher education, we might now consider the view that the *concept* of skills provides an explanation of performance. For a graduate to write effective memos, letters, reports and so on, they would need to have 'communication skills', and in particular, a subset of these, ie 'written communication skills'. Similarly, to engage in spoken forms of communication, eg making a presentation to a team, participating effectively in meetings and so on, they would need 'oral communication skills'. To deal with various problems that arise they need 'problem solving skills'. Most importantly, given the rapid rate of change and the need for graduates to cope with new information, ideas and so on, they have to continue to learn and so need 'learning skills'[22]. The general rule, based on deductive-nomothetic principles, seems to be that, for any activity there is a skill or set of skills which generate (cause) such activity. The

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[22] Often referred to a 'learning to learn skills' (cf NCIHE, 1997). This is a strange use of language, for presumably the purported activity is 'learning', and so the term should be 'learning skills'. The construct 'learning to learn skills' would mean that graduates are expected to engage in the activity of learning to learn, for which that 'skill' is required. This illustrates the disattention to language that permeates the arguments for the conventional model, and indicates the need to address the issue of language, which will be undertaken in later chapters.

task then is to develop the framework of concepts and define them in operational form.

Various projects have been undertaken at institutional and departmental levels purportedly intended to identify the required skills. The Key Skills in Higher Education Dissemination Project was sponsored and funded by the Department for Education and Employment, using a website to publish its materials[23], including a set of case studies from 39 higher education institutions[24] in the UK, regarding the use of a skills approach. The case studies were solicited by the project staff, and the website invites contributions. This set of case studies may therefore be taken as definitive of the UK higher education scene in respect of the adoption of skills approaches. A summary of the analysis of the information provided in the case studies is shown in table 6.2 , indicating the variety of approaches.

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23 Website URL is http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk/supportpack/casestud/welcome.html - accessed on 20th February 2000; homepage (http://www.keyskillsnet.org.uk) indicates last updating as 1st January 2000, but case studies pages are shown as last updated in September 1998

24 Two institutions each appear in two separate case studies

Table 6.2 Analysis of case studies on key skills in higher education

Institution	Institution-wide?	Employment-related?	No. of skills	Integrated/ Separate[25]	comments
Bangor, Wales	Y	Y	7	Separate	
Bournemouth	N	Y	varies	Integrated	
Bradford	[Y]	Y	not specified	unclear	Emphasises study skills
Brighton	N	Y	not specified	Separate	refers to placement
Cheltenham and Gloucester CHE	Y	N	4 areas 14 skills	Separate	study skills and transferable skills linked
Coventry	[N]	Y	7	Integrated	proposed
De Montfort	Y	Y	4	Integrated	
Edinburgh	Y	N	not specified	Separate	mainly study skills
Glasgow Caledonian	N	Y	not specified	Integrated	one course mentioned
Greenwich	Y	Y	6	Integrated	
Hertfordshire	Y	Y	7 areas 57 skills	Integrated	
Huddersfield + Linconshire and Humberside	Y	Y	6	unclear	QCA key skills
Central Lancashire	Y	Y	6	Integrated	QCA key skills
Leeds	Y	Y	6 (?)	Integrated	
Leicester	N	Y	not specified	Separate	
Lincolnshire and Humberside	Y	?	not specified	Separate	
Liverpool	N	Y	6	Separate	QCA key skills
Liverpool Hope UC	Y	Y	6	Separate	QCA key skills
Liverpool John Moores	Y	Y	6	Separate	QCA key skills
Loughborough	Y	N	4	Separate	study skills

Continued on next page

25 ie whether integrated into the curriculum or provided for separately

Table 6.2 Analysis of case studies on key skills in higher education (continued)

Institution	Institution-wide?	Employment-related?	No. of skills	Integrated/ Separate	Comments
Luton	Y	Y	4	Separate	
Manchester	N	N	not specified	Separate	study skills
Newcastle & Northumbria	N?	N	Unclear	Separate	
North London	Y	Y	6	Integrated	
Northumbria	Y	Y	6	Integrated	
Nottingham	N	N	not specified	Separate	study skills
Open University	Y	Y	5	Separate	QCA key skills
Oxford Brookes	Y	Y	5	Integrated	
Plymouth	Y	N	4	Integrated	Dearing skills
Sheffield	Y	Y	4	unclear	
Sheffield Hallam	N	Y	unclear	varies	emphasis on study skills
South Bank	N	N	4	Integrated	study skills
Sunderland	N	N	not specified	Separate	study skills
Surrey	N	N	not specified	Separate	study skills
Sussex	N	N	not specified	Separate	study skills
Teesside	Y	Y	16	Separate	
Thames Valley	Y	Y	not specified	Separate	
Wolverhampton	Y	Y	7	Integrated	
York	N	Y	not specified	Separate	

source of case studies: The Key Skills in Higher Education Dissemination Project

There is clearly considerable difference between the approaches adopted by these institutions, some using just four skills terms, whilst the University of Hertfordshire has 57 skills within seven 'areas'. The University of Northumbria at Newcastle shows just six key skills, but the case study does not indicate that these are then sub-divided; thus 'effective communication' is subdivided into four 'sub-skills', each of which is then has 'performance criteria', in a similar manner to the NVQ model[26]. Given such variety, an obvious question is that of which is the most valid: which best operationalises the skills concepts?

However, there is in fact no indication that any of the lists and frameworks have been derived from any cogent research activity. In at least one case, known to the author through personal involvement, the list of skills was developed by a small group of staff through a 'brainstorming' activity to list 'what sort of graduate should the university aim to produce?'. In a number of the case studies there is reference to the internal committee processes through which the key skills approach was developed; in many cases, much of the operational detail is left to course teams to determine. Some case studies refer to the variety of initiatives which have led to the development of the scheme discussed; in a number of cases, the role of particular individuals or groups, as initiators or sponsors of the developments, is highlighted. The Hertfordshire case study refers to the 'Graduate Skills Menu', whereby curriculum designers can 'pick and mix' from the 57 skills.

In a number of cases there is reference to what appears to be some notion of skills that are specific to the graduates of the institutions concerned; for example, the

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26 Source: website http://www.unn.ac.uk/~rgah2/ksmain~1.htm - accessed 25 February 2000.

Liverpool Hope case study refers to 'Hope Graduateness', the key skills being those expected of the Liverpool Hope graduate. A number of case studies indicate that the institutions concerned have their competitive and financial situations clearly in mind: the University of North London has trademarked its approach as the "Capability Curriculum®"; the Brighton case study emphasises the university prospectus' claim that "our students succeed because they have the kinds of skills employers want"; Bangor has developed a computerised system for profiling skills which it makes commercially available to other institutions.

Overall, the clear impression is that of ad hoc developments, subject to the internal institutional politics, with an orientation to the public image of the institution, rather than a coherent and cogent programme to develop an evidence-based framework of valid concepts appropriate to the analysis and explanation of the activities engaged in by graduates.

6.3.4 Key skills in higher education: conclusion

The claims made for the key skills approach in higher education has been subject to investigation and, as with the MCI approach with regard to managerial competence, found to be lacking in evidential support. There is no evidence to support the claim that the adoption of a key or transferable skills approach within degree programmes *has* resulted in enhanced employment outcomes for the students/ graduate concerned. The research which purports to indicate that employers value key skills when making employment decisions is suspect, such that it is questionable whether employers normally use the language of skills in the manner claimed. The various 'skills projects' undertaken by a number of universities appear *not* to be based on an analysis of the work performance of graduates.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the claims made for the NVQs in management based on MCI Standards, and subjecting these to critical examination against the evidence; similar analysis has been undertaken with respect to the claims made for the 'transferable/ key skills' approach in higher education. Evidence for the claims as presented has been drawn from authoritative documentary sources; evidence adduced to test such claims has included information contained within such documentary sources, and from investigations of what actually occurred. The analysis here can be summarised in terms of three groups of claims:

- economic: that adoption of the approaches advocated would result in economic benefit at national and/or at organisational level;
- social acceptability: that the parties to the employment relationship, employers and employees, would welcome the adoption of the approaches advocated;
- theoretical and methodological: that the approaches advocated are theoretically sound and provide practical methods for articulating the nature of 'competence', ie whatever constitutes the nature of the ability to perform as required or desired within relevant occupational arenas.

In each case, the evidence adduced in support of the approaches was found to be inadequate to substantiate the claims; in the case of some claims, other evidence indicated that these claims were unsustainable.

In terms of the task of this thesis, it is not necessary that the claims be proven to be unsustainable, merely that they are not substantiated. The onus is upon the protagonists of the MCI/ NVQ approach, and of the transferable/ key skills approach to demonstrate that their claims have been borne out, if they seek to claim that the

assumptions on which these approaches are based, here called the 'conventional model of learning and competence', is superior to any alternative that might be presented. The aim of this thesis *is* to argue for such an alternative, which will be referred to as a 'relational perspective on learning and competence'. Before presenting that, however, the critique of the conventional model will be continued in the next chapter, through a conceptual analysis of learning and competence. This will seek to 'clear the ground' for the attempt to develop the alternative 'relational' perspective.

Chapter 7

The Language and Logic of Learning and Competence:

A Conceptual Analysis

7.1 Introduction

In previous two chapters, we considered empirical evidence, both primary and secondary, concerning the conventional model of learning and skill. Chapter 5 examined the interview-based accounts given by graduates entering employment and novice managers, regarding their trajectories into their current positions. Here we found that the terms 'learn', 'skill', and 'competence' were *not* significant items in the vocabulary used by the interviewees when discussing their trajectories. Moreover, the accounts presented a much more complex process by which the interviewees had arrived at their current employment positions than would be anticipated by the straightforward matching of skills and competences possessed with those which, according to the learning and skills agenda, are required and sought by employers. The possibility that such findings are a consequence of the limited sample of persons interviewed, or of the unrepresentative nature of the sample, was taken up in chapter 6 in which the available evidence concerning the validity of the claims made for the conventional model was examined. Here we found a paucity of such evidence, and that what evidence *might be* presented in support of the model was highly contestable. Moreover, there was evidence which served to undermine the validity of the claims in favour of the model. From these analyses, it was concluded that there are grounds for questioning the model itself. In this chapter, the argument of the thesis will be

developed by subjecting the key terms of the conventional model to *conceptual analysis.*

It will be argued in this chapter that the *concepts* 'learn', 'skill' and 'competence', *as presented in the conventional model,* are deeply flawed and therefore cannot serve to be the basis of our understanding of how higher-level education and training relate to the social circumstances in which they are of significant consequence. This arises from the *systematic ambiguity* of the terms 'learning', 'skill', 'competence', and related word-forms. We shall address such systematic ambiguity through what may be seen as *'conceptual ground-clearing'*, examining the logic or 'grammar' of the *language of learning and* competence. This analysis will draw upon the methods of linguistic philosophy in the tradition of Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein[1], particularly in their concern to overcome the tendency for conceptual confusion to arise from an inadequate examination of the way that language is actually used.

The argument here is that the verb 'to learn', and its various tense forms (particularly present and past tenses), cannot *denote* an activity ('learning') *sui generis*, but *connotes* attributions and judgements of other, related activities. From this, we shall examine the central role that the notion of 'performance' has in such attributions and judgements, and show as false the assumption that performance can be unequivocal and transparent evidence of learning and competence. Finally, it will be argued that performance is always *interpreted,* and that the *essentially social* character of the *interpretation* of performance implicates issues of social practice and

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1 ie the later work of Wittgenstein.

identity. These will form the basis of a reframing of learning and of skills and competence, in respect of the issues of concern in this thesis, that is of trajectories into graduate employment and into management positions.

7.2 The ambiguity of 'learning'

In chapter 1, we noted that the terms 'learning', 'skill', and 'competence' (and cognates) are used within education and training policy debate *and* in discussion concerned with pedagogy. However, these are clearly not the only contexts where the terms are used; a fuller listing of such contexts would include the following:

a) mundane, everyday, colloquial discourse;

b) political-economic discourse, dealing with the requirements of and aspirations for the nation's workforce in the emerging conditions of the coming decades;

c) educational discourse, concerning the purpose, form, and processes (including assessment and certification), and sometimes content, of various curricula and programmes;

d) the discourse of personnel or 'human resource' management, particularly in the context of recruitment and selection;

e) professional and academic ('scientific') psychology, in which the concepts of learning, skill and competence have particular meanings within particular frameworks of theory and research methodology[2].

That there may be significant differences in the meanings of the terms, between the various contexts, has not been given serious attention within the learning and competence agenda. This section will examine these differences in meaning.

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[2] Or, in Kuhn's terms, 'paradigms' (Kuhn, 1962).

There has been a longstanding emphasis within philosophy upon the need to beware of problems in reasoning which may arise from lack of attention to differences in meaning. Flew (1979) uses the term '*systematic ambiguity*' for

> "words or expressions that may always have the same meaning when applied to one kind of thing, but have a different meaning when applied to another kind of thing."
> (Flew, 1979: 11).

Flew appears to identity systematic ambiguity with Aristotle's use of 'paronymous', as he gives the same example of the word 'healthy'. This seems to accord with Austin's discussion of paronymity[3], whereby

> "on different occasions of its use, [a] word may possess connotations which are *partly* identical and *partly* different..."
> (Austin, 1961: 27).

Waismann (1952) states that the term 'systematic ambiguity' was coined by Russell in connection with his Theory of Types, but goes on the apply the term more broadly to what he terms 'the many-level structure of language'. Different sorts of statements[4] may be considered as belonging to different domains or 'language strata', and thus subject to different logical features. So, in contrast to the views of the Logical Positivists,

> "Statements may be *true* in different senses, *verifiable* in different senses, *meaningful* in different senses."
> (Waismann, 1952: 26; emphasis in original)

In a similar vein, Ryle (1949) uses the term 'category-mistake' for those errors

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3 In the source cited, Austin comments on the passage at the beginning of Aristotle's *Categories*, in which the terms συνωνύμως ('synonymous'), ὁμωνύμως ('homonymous') and παρωνύμως ('paronymous') are discussed. Austin glosses συνωνύμως ('synonymous') as applying when a word is used with the same connotation on each occasion of its use; ὁμωνύμως ('homonymous') applies where the connotations are different on different occasions of the word's use (Austin, 1961: 26ff).

4 Waismann gives the examples of "a material object statement, a sense datum statement, a law of nature, a geometrical proposition, a statement describing national characteristics, a statement describing a half-faded memory picture, a statement describing a dream, a proverb, and so on." (Waismann, 1952: 19)

of reasoning where a concept of one logical type is used as if it is of a different logical type[5]. He uses the example of a foreigner, visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time, being shown various colleges, libraries, departments, and so on, who then asks 'But where is the University?'. Amongst other examples is someone ('John Doe') being able to recognise another named person ('Richard Roe') in the street but not able to recognise the Average Taxpayer. As Ryle puts it, John Doe

> "knows how to talk sense in certain sorts of discussions about the Average Taxpayer, but he is baffled to say why he could not come across him in the street as he can come across Richard Roe."
> (Ryle, 1949: 19)

In another work, Ryle (1951) discusses 'systematically misleading expressions', particularly whereby the syntactical form of sentence containing a certain word, appearing to describe some state of affairs regarding an object referred to by the term, may mislead us with regard to the logical form of the expression. Such expressions, their meaning and their truth or falsity, generally carries no problems in mundane discourse (by "the naive user"), but contain

> "a trap which only threatens the man who has begun to generalize about sorts or types of states of affairs and assumes that every statement gives in its syntax a clue to the logical form of the facts that it records."
> (Ryle, 1951: 17)[6]

Without engaging in debate over the meanings of the terms 'paronymity', 'systematic ambiguity' and 'systematically misleading expressions', we can take the general point that certain terms may be the source of ambiguity which is particularly difficult to notice because they are used in a variety of modes of discourse. Given the

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5 Hyland's use of the notion of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Hyland, 1998: 169), which we noted in chapter 3 in discussing 'key skills', might be seen as an example, or special case, of a category-mistake.

6 Ryle emphasises that he is referring not only or even primarily to philosophers but anyone "who embarks on abstraction" (ibid.)

variety of contexts of its use, the terms 'learning', 'skill', 'competence' and so on are prime candidates for possible systematic ambiguity, and we must beware of the fallacy of assuming that these have the same meaning in the various contexts of their use. 'Learning' is used as an adjective of *different* 'kinds of thing', for example, a learning *society*, learning *organisation*, learning *outcomes*, learning *process*. The word is also used as the 'thing' to which an adjective is applied, such as *lifelong* learning and *informal* (and *formal*) learning, or in compounds such as '*learning and teaching*'. Such uses of the term, and terms based on the stem 'learn-' (eg 'learner', 'learnt'), and of the terms 'skill', 'competence', 'competency' and cognates, may present a 'trap', as Ryle puts it, such that confusion results if we are not careful to identify difference in meaning. Rather we should engage in sound conceptual analysis of the terms in order to avoid what Wittgenstein warns us as the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (Wittgenstein, 1953: 109). Moreover, given the social, economic and political consequences deemed to be at stake, we should heed Andreski's warning that

> "constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create verbal confusion..."
> Andreski, 1972: 61)

One possible response to this is the argument that common to all uses of the term 'learning' is some connotation that an individual, or collection of individuals, undertake (ie engage in) or undergo (ie are subjected to) a process of learning. As we noted in chapter 3, Borger and Seaborne view the fact that we use the same word 'learning', in the various examples they give, as indicating that there is some 'common feature' (Borger and Seaborne,1966: 12). Such a view also appears to be

implied by texts which ask the reader to think of some occasions when they have personally 'learnt something', to consider how that learning took place, and so deduce some basic theory of learning which is then related to definitions and explanation arising in psychological theories (eg Kolb et al, 1971; Reid and Barrington, 1997; Osland et al, 2001).

Wittgenstein's advice in considering the meaning of words which are used in various different contexts is to "*look and see* whether there is anything common to all" (Wittgenstein, 1953: 66; emphasis in original). As part of his argument that the meaning of utterances must be sought in their use in context, rather than by some fixed correspondence with some order of reality, Wittgenstein uses the notion of 'language game'. To counter the objection that he has failed to say what is the essence of a language game, what is common to all the activities called 'language games', he asks us to consider what is common to 'proceedings we call "games"'.

> "If you look at them you will not see something that is common to them *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that."
> (op.cit. 66)

Continuing, he invokes the idea of 'family resemblance':

> "I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc etc overlap and criss-cross in the same way."
> (op.cit. 67)

So too, we may argue, with 'learning'; rather than some common defining

characteristics of all such situations, might we not do better to look for family resemblances between the situations in which we *use the term*?

The definitional approach adopted by textbook writers fails to ask the critical question 'what are we doing when we use the term "learning" in these cases?', or, in Wittgenstein's terms, 'what are the language games in which we are engaged?'. In

particular, we might point to ('look and see') circumstances in which talk of learning is merely part of some conversation amongst family and friends (its mundane use), and circumstances in which such talk forms part of 'official discourse', as in formal educational and occupational settings. The circumstances of a proud parent relating to the child's grandparents that "Abigail's learnt how to ride her bike" are significantly different from the secondary school teacher's end-of-year report that she has learnt to construct basic sentences in French using the present and future tenses. They differ again from the circumstances in which, in her part-time employment as a post office clerk, her manager indicates (in the company's official staff training records) that she has learnt to issue motor vehicle taxation discs.

Of course, this does not show that different circumstances *necessarily* indicate different meanings of the term 'learnt', 'learn', and 'learning'. But the *a priori* assumption that there is a single common meaning of the term 'learning' (and other forms of speech from the root term 'learn'), *free of content and context of use*, is severely undermined by Wittgenstein's language-game argument. Even the reference to 'change of behaviour'[7] fails to perform the task of demonstrating common meaning. Indeed, often we use the term 'learning' when referring to *new* behaviour, as in the case of the child learning to ride a bike; to talk of this as 'change of behaviour' would appear to be a somewhat forced usage. Besides that, when we explain *how we have come to change* the way we do something, we would normally give *reasons*[8]; for

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7 For example, as used by Borger and Seaborne (1966).

8 We may note here Peters' critique of the concept of motive as a causal mechanism, and of theories of motivation based on such conceptualisation (Peters, 1958). "Such theories of mechanisms underlying behaviour should not be taken as sufficient explanations of behaviour", argues Peters. The argument in this thesis would add the conventional model of learning and skill to 'such theories of mechanisms underlying behaviour'.

example:

> "I try to avoid the M25 during the rush hour; you can never tell when there's going to be a tailback somewhere or other."

The simple statement "I tend to avoid the M25" would tend to evoke the question "Oh, why's that then?", to which the response "I've learnt to" would be deemed to be insufficient explanation[9]. So too would be the response, based on the Kolb model of experiential learning, discussed in chapter 3, that "I've had experiences which I've reflected upon, and developed a generalised notion which I've tested out in practice and had confirmed by other experiences".

Given such issues, the next section will seek to examine the language and logic of 'learning' as used in *mundane* discourse. This will be followed by consideration of the more technical uses. The mundane use of 'learning' may be taken to precede more technical uses; that is, the technical uses arose later in history, in the development of education, of formal selection processes for employment, of state policy, and of scientific psychology. In that sense the mundane use may be seen as carrying what Austin terms the 'nuclear' meaning of the term (Austin, 1961: 27).

7.3 The language and logic of mundane uses of 'learning'

This section will seek to the elucidate the *mundane*, everyday meaning of the term 'learn', and its derivatives ('learner', 'learning', 'learnt' etc)[10], through examination of how we ordinarily use the language of learning. An important starting point for this is the difference in usage of the *tense formations* of the verb 'to learn',

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9 We might, however, say "I've found that you can never be certain, tell etc", or even "in my experience, you can never etc". Such language serves to justify, or warrant (Toulmin, 1958), the statement made, not to describe some process (finding) or state (in experience).

10 And also of 'competent', 'able', 'capable' etc, which are related, eg 'is competent (at)' is, for the most part, cognate with 'has learnt (to)' and so on.

particularly the past (simple and perfect), eg 'he learnt', 'she has learnt', and the present (continuous), eg 'she is learning'. In the conventional model, the past tense is clearly related to the notion of learning *outcome*, whilst the present tense relates to the notion of a learning *process*. Superficially, these appear to be just straightforward differences in the time at which the utterance is made and that in which the purported process occurs or occurred. Closer examination, however, yields significant differences in meaning.

Taking the *past tense* formations first, we should note how these relate to statements of capacity, ie 'can', 'knows', 'understands' etc. Thus if someone says 'Jack has learnt to swim', this statement can usually be taken as meaning the same as 'Jack can swim'. Or to say 'Sue has learnt the difference between latent and manifest function', is (usually) the same in meaning as 'Sue understands the difference etc'. In particular contexts, there may be subtle but significant difference in meaning, often given by other contiguous utterances: for example, the first statement above might be made in response to the question 'And what has Jack done over the summer vacation?'[11]. But in these examples, such differences make no significant points about learning *per se*. We might, in some contexts, wish to emphasise that ability has been *acquired*, rather than that it was in some way treated as innate, or that was no more than one might expect. In such a case, there may be an implied parenthetical statement: eg 'Ivan has learnt to speak English (he's from Russia)'; 'I've learnt to hold my tongue (I was prone to lose my temper)'. Such uses tell us about something about the circumstances which pertained hitherto or other particulars of the situation, but not

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11 In which case, the answer 'He has learnt to swim' implies that he could *not* swim prior to the summer vacation, and *now* he can.

about some purported generalisable process, *learning*, which has occurred. In general, the past-tense use of the verb 'to learn' may, without significant loss of meaning, often be substituted by the words indicated above, ie 'can', 'knows', 'understands', etc.

In his attack on the Cartesian doctrine (or 'myth') of the mind-body split, Ryle (1949) subjects these types of words to analysis. He refers to utterances using such words as *dispositional statements*, rather than descriptions of occurrences or episodes. The problem is that the 'para-mechanical' notion of the mind in the Cartesian approach, what he calls ("with deliberate abusiveness") the 'dogma of the Ghost in the Machine', has tended to confuse us about the logic of such statements:

> "the vogue of the para-mechanical legend has led many people to ignore the ways in which these concepts actually behave and to construe them instead as items in the descriptions of occult causes and effects'.
> (op.cit., p.112-3)

Rather, he argues, dispositional statements should be treated as testable, 'semi-hypothetical' statements. They are similar to hypotheticals ('if ...then...' statements), which are law-statements; these make no statement of fact but nevertheless are either true or false depending on whether or not particular matters of fact satisfy the two parts, the 'if...' clause and the 'then...' clause. The point of establishing such laws is to enable us to infer from particular matters of fact to other particular matters of fact, to explain one fact or set of facts by reference to others, or to bring about or prevent certain states of affairs (p.117). Ryle uses the term 'inference-ticket', by analogy with a season ticket, which 'licenses' such inference, explanation, and manipulation of states of affairs. Ryle explains that, whilst hypotheticals must be open, ie not refer to any *particular* persons or things, the term 'semi-hypotheticals' refers to dispositional statements which *do* mention some particular persons or things, as is the case when

we say 'Steve can swim using the butterfly stroke' or 'Jean knows the Greek alphabet'. They are law-like in the way that we use them:

> "They apply to, or are satisfied by, the actions, reactions and states of the object; they are inference-tickets, which license us to predict, retrodict, explain, modify these actions, reactions, states."
> (Ryle, 1949: 119)

Since the use of the past tense of the verb 'to learn' normally carries the same meaning as words such as 'can', 'knows', 'understands', and so on (excepting the examples discussed above, which are not significant for our purposes here), we must treat it as a dispositional word. As such, its function is in the construction of hypothetical and semi-hypothetical statements, rather than in the reporting of some occurrence. That is, to say that someone has learnt something, or has learnt to do something, is to make an inference claim which is used to explain, retrodict or predict performance. We should also note that the same applies to the use of the term 'competent', ie to refer to someone as competent is to make an inference about their performance in the past (as explanation or retrodiction) or future (prediction)[12]. To ascribe competence, to say that someone can do something, that they have learnt, are merely different ways of expressing dispositional statements. The use of past tense of 'to learn' does not normally describe the execution, in the past, of some identifiable activity called 'learning'.

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[12] Noddings (1984) considers Ryle's approach in relation to competence-based education, but rejects it as an appropriate way forward. However, she appears to equate Ryle's *philosophical behaviourism* with the manner in which the competence approach engages in the analysis of competence into a set of observable performances. Arguably, this is not a valid interpretation of Ryle's analysis, which may be taken to be more concerned to provide a critique of the notion of an 'inner' realm of existence in which can be located the purported causal mechanisms such as competences, and so, by extension, the supposed process of learning. Ryle's philosophical analysis provides the necessary conceptual groundclearing to enable the more significant analysis of the *social* character of learning and of competence, which the next chapter will go on to address.

What, then, should we make of the present tense of the verb 'to learn'? We do say things like 'Nicola is learning to drive', 'Reena is learning to produce Web pages', 'Ben is learning the flute' and so on. Surely these refer to the activity of learning, in which they are engaged? A problem that arises from this is that, if learning is an activity, it is not an observable activity. It is tempting, then, to locate learning 'in the mind', as an activity of some incorporeal 'inner self' (in humanistic approaches) or 'central processing unit' (in cognitivism). Of course, there may be observable activities related to what we call learning. Thus, we can see Nicola sitting in the driver's seat of a car with the instructor sitting beside her, as they travel along the road making various manoeuvres. But we don't see her *separately* learning to drive. Moreover, she doesn't cease learning to drive when the lesson is over. If a visiting aunt asks the 17-year old Nicola why she is reading the book of the Highway Code, and Nicola replies 'Oh, I'm learning to drive', it would be considered strange of the aunt to say 'Don't be silly; you're sitting on the sofa reading a book'! If learning were an activity, it would seem to take place outside of the normal dimensions of space and time, such that it cannot be observed and is taking place even when it is not being performed.

Again, Ryle's discussion of dispositions and occurrences can provide us with a method for analysing the present-tense usage. He argues that there is an important class of occurrence or episodic words which, because they are active verbs, have tended to make us oblivious to their logic. These are *success* or *achievement* verbs; the examples he gives are 'win', 'unearth', 'find', 'cure', 'convince', 'prove', 'cheat', 'unlock', 'safeguard', 'conceal'. These correspond with *task* verbs, with the force of 'trying to'. Sometimes we use an achievement verb as a synonym for a task verb (or

verbal phrase):

> " 'Hear' is sometimes used as a synonym of 'listen' and 'mend' as a synonym of 'try to mend'."
> (op. cit., p. 143)

A major difference between the logical force of a task verb and its corresponding achievement verb is that, in using the latter,

> "we are asserting that some state of affairs obtains over and above that which consists in the performance, if any, of the subservient task activity."
> (ibid.)

Thus, for a doctor to cure a patient, she must both treat the patient and the patient must be well again. Ryle notes that there may be achievements without a task performance: for example, success may also be ascribed to luck. In addition, we may use a success verb *in anticipation*, with the possibility that we will revise the usage in the event of failure:

> "[Someone] may rashly claim the expected success, but he will withdraw his claim if he discovers that, despite his having done the best he could, something has still gone wrong. I withdraw my claim to have seen a misprint, or convinced the voter, if I find that there was no misprint, or the voter has cast his vote for my opponent."
> (op.cit.,p.144)

We have a range of task verbs and verbal phrases associated with learning. In educational settings we say we are 'studying' a subject[13]. Other terms include 'exploring', 'practising', 'researching', 'trying to', 'having a go at', 'looking into', 'reading up on', and the like. There are also *passive* formulations: 'being taught', 'being shown', 'receiving instruction'[14]. Such task verbs and verbal phrases carry no

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13 We should also note the use of the term 'reading' when applied to undergraduate study. This usage seems to be confined to older universities; it would seem pretentious if used in relation to study at a newer university. This is yet another mark of the displacement by the language of learning.

14 The term 'train' is usually taken as a transitive verb, applied more to occupants of lower status positions (or animals). However, we should note phrases such as 'training to be' and 'training for', especially in respect of high status occupations eg 'She is training to be a priest/ lawyer/ doctor', and 'She's training for the priesthood/ the bar'. This reinforces Wittgenstein's exhortation to 'look and see' usage rather prescribe meaning through definition.

necessity, in their meaning, that success has been achieved: 'She practised the flute every day but she still can't play a single tune', 'He studied biology at school, but failed the exam'.

The use of both a task verb and a success verb together does not describe two different activities:

> "When a person is described as having fought and won, or as having journeyed and arrived, he is not being said to have done two things, but to have done one thing with a certain upshot. Similarly a person who has aimed and missed has not followed up one occupation by another; he has done one thing, which was a failure."
> (Ryle, 1949: 144)

As Ryle says, success verbs belong, put crudely, "not to the vocabulary of the player, but to the vocabulary of the referee" (p.145). So too, we may argue, with learning. An undergraduate studying industrial sociology and learning about Braverman's deskilling thesis is not doing two separate things, but one thing, ie studying successfully. To say she has learnt is to say she has studied successfully. We can also apply this to teaching (demonstrating, explaining, telling, etc) and the now-fashionable notion of 'facilitating learning'. The use of the latter is as a phrase to indicate anticipated success in teaching; it is neither the same as teaching (which may be unsuccessful) nor a separate, superior activity.

To summarise and conclude this discussion of the *mundane* use of the language of learning, we can say that the verb 'to learn', in various grammatical forms, does *not* refer to some *activity* performed by someone. Rather, when we examine how we use the term we can see different jobs that it performs within particular contexts. When used in the past tense, its primary use is to make a dispositional statement, one that licenses or warrants inferences about performance, in the past, the present or the (anticipated) future. When used in the present tense, and

sometimes in the past tense, it serves to make an evaluation of success of certain well-understood tasks, which are either observable or can be elaborated in terms of observable activities. Such activities include studying, reading, practising, rehearsing, discussing, performed by the individual trying to learn (ie achieve the dispositional state of knowing understanding, being able to), and teaching, explaining, showing, questioning, and so on as performed by someone helping another to learn (succeed in studying etc). There is no need to assume that there is some *common process* invisibly taking place *within* individual entities; there is especially no need to posit some *activity*, called 'learning', that is performed by the individual, *separate from and in addition to* these activities.

In the next section, we shall examine the more *formal, technical* use of the language of learning and competence, ie in the contexts of political-economic, employment and psychological discourse.

7.4 Learning as a technical and an untechnical concept

In moving from mundane use of the term 'learning' (and the other terms with which we are concerned in this thesis) to the use in more formal settings, we are moving from the use of what Ryle refers to as an 'untechnical concept' to that of a 'technical concept' (Ryle, 1954). We seem to have no problem with understanding what someone means, and what we ourselves mean, in such mundane, untechnical use. When, however, the term is used in a more *technical* sense, Ryle argues, the meaning can only be grasped in relation to a complex of other terms appropriate to the technical domain of its use. Thus, for example,

> "[t]he technical terms of genetics are theory-laden, laden, that is, not just with theoretical luggage of some sort or other but with the luggage of genetic theory. Their meanings change with changes in the theory. Knowing their

> meaning requires some grasp of the theory."(Ryle, 1954: 90)

Similarly when considering the meaning of 'learning' when used in the discourse of political-economy, or (scientific/ professional) psychology, or human resource management, or education and training, we must consider the 'theoretical luggage' of such different discourses. The assumption that because we use the term 'learning' in our mundane conversation without difficulty of understanding, the term is used with the same meaning in other discursive contexts may lead to the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 109).

We should be clear here that we are not just talking about 'mere' language. Ryle's analysis is consonant with that of Wittgenstein (1953) in relation to what he terms 'language games' within which expressions have their meaning. By this he does not mean a 'game of language', mere playing with words. Rather, Wittgenstein is referring to sets of practices, linguistic and otherwise:

> "I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'."
> (Wittgenstein, 1953: 7)

The meanings of 'learning' within the arenas identified above must therefore be considered alongside the actions into which the language of learning 'is woven'.

When we examine the discourse of learning in the context of government policy (advocated, debated, enacted, contested), primarily concerned with economic matters, we see that references to 'learning' generally concern *measurable* targets and outcomes expressed in terms of credentials, time spent and numbers of participants in formal education and training, expenditure, differentials in income in relation to level of education, and so on. These are typically the measures adopted within human capital theory and other economics-based approaches to educational theory, policy and practice. Thus the National Learning Targets are stated in terms of proportions (of the

population) who should have achieved various qualifications levels. Even the 'participation index' for lifelong learning is expressed in terms of participation in formal education and training. In a recent speech, the newly appointed Chair of the Learning and Skills Council (for England) stated that the Council has a statutory duty to 'promote learning' (Sanderson, 2000). But it is clear from the passage that follows in his speech that he is referring to formal provision of education and training, ensuring that it meets demand, is of high quality, is effectively marketed and promoted, and does not present barriers to access. The term 'learning' in such discourse could simply be replaced by the terms 'education' and/or 'training' as conventionally understood (albeit taking account of non-conventional modes of delivery) without loss of meaning.

Turning to the discourse of learning in respect of the management of employees or 'human resources', we may see how this has become a supplement to, or a replacement of, other discourses that are concerned with *work performance*[15]. Indeed, when considered, it is difficult to understand why an employer should be concerned with learning, and its purported outcomes (skills, competence etc) *except* as the basis for desired improvements in work performance intended to enhance organisational performance. So whether someone has learned, and what they have learned, that is, whether someone is 'competent' or has certain desired 'competencies' or 'skills', are of concern within the practices of the selection and recruitment, and of deployment, of employees as 'human resources' to productive processes. The

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15 The management literature has tended to discuss the key issues concerned with work performance in terms of the 'suitability' of particular individuals for particular types of work (identified through various forms of assessment), of the motivation of the worker, of the means of control and discipline, and of training.

emphasis here is upon *future* performance; that is, in terms of Ryle's analysis of dispositional statements, considered in the previous section, these terms 'license us to predict' future performance (Ryle, 1949: 119). However, we should be careful here with the term 'predict', which itself is ambiguous: it may have a strong sense, of foretelling accurately, or a weaker sense, merely of anticipating (with a greater or lesser degree of confidence or felt certainty). As will be discussed below, it is only the latter sense that is appropriate, because the relevant understanding of the nature of *human* behaviour in work contexts, particular at 'higher levels', lies outside the cause-effect sequencing necessary for prediction in the strong sense to be made.

The use of 'learning', 'skill' and so on as *technical* concepts is most strongly developed within psychology, as a professional, academic and scientific discipline. As we saw in chapter 3, different paradigms within psychology have conceptualised learning in different ways. Thus, the concept of 'learning' within the research programmes and their findings within the conditioning, stimulus-response paradigm can only be understood along with the 'theoretical luggage' (Ryle, 1954: 90) of that paradigm. This applies similarly for cognitivism, humanism, and experiential learning theory. However, as noted in chapter 3, the various approaches to learning theory have shared a common understanding that there is a learning process *per se*, and that this process is a *causal one*.

The question of causality in respect of human conduct is longstanding in philosophy, and is connected with the distinction between 'behaviour' and 'movement'[16]. Hamlyn (1953) draws on the distinction made by Aristotle between

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16 There is also the related debate between determinism and agency, or freewill. No attempt will be made here to resolve what has eluded various attempts at resolution over the centuries.

ἐνέργεια (energeia, which Hamlyn translates as 'activity') and κίνησις (kinesis, translated as 'movement') to argue that attempts to analyse human behaviour in terms merely of sequences of movements are invalid. Some movements, such as reflex action, may certainly be analysed in terms of causal processes within human physiology. However, this cannot provide a full account of human behaviour; activity may performed *'in order to'* do something, eg posting a letter in order to fulfil a promise, or merely because the person performing the activity wished to do so. These accounts of behaviour may be termed 'reasons', as opposed to 'causes' in a mechanistic sense[17]. Insofar as most aspects of work performance, particularly at the higher-levels with which we are here concerned, are generally considered to involve intentional, meaningful behaviour, rather than mere reflex responses, it would be accounts based on reasons rather than causes that should concern us.

The movement-activity distinction discussed by Hamlyn (1953) will be taken up again in the next chapter, in the more extended form adopted by Harré and Secord (1972). For the present, we may note that the use of the term 'learning' as a technical concept within psychological analyses of behaviour in *causal* terms sheds little light on its meaning in the employment context. What is required is an analysis of the use of that term, and the terms 'skill', 'competence' and so on, which takes account of human behaviour as intentional and meaningful. The next section seeks to engage in such analysis in respect of the use of such terms in *judgements* of behaviour.

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17 Peters (1956, 1958) makes a similar argument in respect of the concept of motivation, and of attempts to explain human behaviour in terms of the notion of 'drives'.

7.5 Performing judgements of competence

It might be argued, against the analysis of *mundane* use of the language of learning presented in section 7.3, that, in social arenas in which learning and competence are deemed to be of major importance, these terms do in fact have a more formalised, technical meaning that consists of *descriptions* (attributes and characteristics) of individuals. Such descriptions may be true or false, depending upon whether or not certain states of affairs exist; the task then is to investigate what states of affairs would count as determining the truth or otherwise of the situation. With the development of the NVQ system, very many millions of pounds of public funding has gone into projects concerned to identify the criteria by which a person's competence (in an occupation) may be decided. This view will be examined here.

Austin (1962) provides a reminder that sometimes what appear to be descriptive statements are, in reality, of a different kind of utterances:

> "...many specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements do not serve to indicate some specially odd additional feature in the reality reported, but to indicate (not to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way it is to be taken and the like."
> (Austin, 1962: 3)

He examines a type of sentence which has the grammatical form of descriptive statement but which, when uttered, serve to carry out an action; these he calls 'performative utterances'. Examples include those of statements made when marrying, naming of a ship, betting, promising, apologizing, congratulating[18]. Thus, when someone says "I bet you £50 that England will win the World Cup in 2002", they are

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18 Austin is referring to explicit bets, promises, apologies etc, ie 'I bet you ...', 'I promise that I shall...', 'I apologize for ...' and so on.

not describing some situation, but actually making a bet[19]. Such statements are neither true nor false, that is, truth and falsity do not apply to them. They *may* succeed in performing the relevant acts (marriage, naming, betting etc), or may 'go wrong' or 'misfire' for various reasons (no marriage occurs, etc); Austin terms this distinction the 'felicity' or 'infelicity' of the utterance.

In continuing his analysis, Austin concludes that the distinction between constatives (ie descriptive statements) and performatives is inadequate, and that the analysis should focus on 'the total speech act in the total speech situation'. He uses the term '*locutionary act*' to refer to the act of saying something, ie the utterance of a set of meaningful words in a manner such that the utterance has a 'certain more-or-less definite sense and reference'[20]. The locutionary act performed by a person on particular occasion may be reported in terms of indirect speech 'He said (that) the cat was on the mat'" (Austin, 1962: 95). However, there is a further act that would thereby be performed, that of an *illocutionary act*.

> "Thus in performing a locutionary act we shall also be performing such as act as:
>
> asking or answering a question,
> giving some information or an assurance or a warning,
> announcing a verdict or an intention'
> pronouncing a sentence,
> making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism,
> making an identification or giving a description
>
> and the numerous like."
> (op.cit.: 98-99)

This type of act is then distinguished from a third, that of a *perlocutionary act*,

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19 Or rather, they may be taken to be attempting to make a bet, subject to conditions of 'felicity', as Austin puts it.

20 Austin elaborates on distinctions between the making of certain sounds (the 'phonetic act'), the uttering of words in a manner which conform to a certain grammar (the 'phatic act'), and the uttering of such words with some definite meaning (the 'rhetic act'). Such a distinction, without the labels attached by Austin, may also be found in the work of Vološinov (1986) in the philosophy of language, and de Saussure (1974) in linguistics

whereby certain consequences are brought about:

> "Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons."
> (op.cit., 101)

Such effects may be brought about intentionally or unintentionally, and if intentionally, with explicit, oblique or no reference to that intention. Austin provides examples of these different acts, showing them in terms of reports act such acts, eg

> Locution: "He said to me 'Shoot her!' meaning by 'shoot' shoot and referring by 'her to her";
> Illocution: "He urged (or advised, ordered &c.) me to shoot her."
> Perlocution: "He persuaded me to shoot her."
> (op.cit., 101-102)

We can now apply this distinction to statements that a person has learnt, is competent, has a (particular key) skill (to a certain level, etc), in the formal contexts with which we are concerned, ie in educational and employment settings (and in settings relating these to each other). The paradigm *locutionary* form would be where someone explicitly states "X is competent". However, in practice there may be other forms in which the *illocutionary* act at issue here is performed, which may not involve spoken utterances, eg the presentation of a written set of marks, tick marks in boxes on a form, or a written statement. There are indications that Austin would include these within his analysis, eg the example of "'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother' as occurring in a will" (Austin, 1962: 5), and the example of the use of verbs in the second or third person (eg "Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only") (ibid.: 57). These would normally be written (a will, a notice), rather

than spoken[21]. The issue here is one of meaning of communicative acts of different types, descriptive (constative) and performative, rather than the physical form these take, such as spoken, gestured, written and so on.

Taking the paradigm form as 'X is competent', as stated by A, allowing for the alternative formulations discussed above, the question now is this: is the illocutionary act a constative or a performative? If we consider the context of *assessment* settings in which progression is being determined within a programme of education, or the award of a qualification is being decided, the statement may be taken as being very performative-like. It might be regarded as, following Hunter (1990)[22], a *'quasi-performative'*. The particular type of performative it resembles is that identified by Austin as a '*verdictive*'. This consists

> "in the delivering of a finding, official or unofficial, upon evidence or reasons as to the value of fact, so far as these are distinguishable.[...] Verdictives have obvious connexions with truth and falsity, soundness and unsoundness and fairness and unfairness."
> (Austin, 1962: 153)

The same would apply where the statement is made on the context of some formal selection occasion, within an employing organisation. In both settings, there is a perlocutionary effect, ie the individual X is permitted to progress within the course, or is awarded the qualification, or offered the job. The explicit performative form would thus be "I judge that X is competent", the illocutionary act being the expression (not report) of a judgement.

Of course, *perlocutionary effects* may result from constatives, eg at a party,

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21 See also: "'You are warned that the bull is dangerous' is equivalent to 'I, John Jones, warn you that the bull is dangerous' or

This bull is dangerous.
(Signed) John Jones." (op. cit.: 62)

22 Strangely, Hunter makes no mention of and gives no citation to Austin's work, despite obviously following Austin's argument.

person B may throw a glass of wine over person C after hearing A say that C is a keen foxhunter, where that statement is made and intended merely as a descriptive, eg in introducing C to B, not knowing that B is an avid campaigner against blood sports. However, the case of statements regarding a person being competent (and the like) in formal assessment situations (in education and in employment contexts) has the features which Austin identifies as differentiating performatives from constatives, ie the illocutionary act is constituted by *convention* (Austin, 1962: 128). It further meets the necessary conditions for 'felicity' of a performative, in addition to the existence of a conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect. These include the requirement that the persons and circumstances must be appropriate for invoking the procedure, that the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly and completely, and that where required by the procedure, the relevant person should actually have the appropriate thoughts or feelings, and/ or should intend to conduct themselves afterwards in the appropriate manner and actually do so (op cit.: 14-15). Thus, the statement "X is competent" works (is felicitous), in the settings relevant to our considerations here, only where it is appropriate as a convention within the assessment procedures, where the person making the statement has an appropriate position (ie as assessor), where others involved in the assessment carry out their parts correctly (eg the committee endorses the statement), and where the assessor does believe that X is worthy of the qualification, or would perform the job effectively.

The argument then is that, in formal settings where assessment is undertaken, in education and employment, the explicit statement of X's competence is best viewed as a (quasi-) performative, and that alternative forms of expression or action with equivalent (perlocutionary) effect may be re-presented in the form of the explicit

statement and so are also (quasi-)performative. Such a view redirects our attention away from questions regarding the empirical evidence for determining the truth or otherwise of statements of the form "X is competent", and towards the conditions under which such a (quasi-)performative is 'felicitous'.

These conditions include, in particular, the *conventions* through which the illocutionary act is performed. This leads inevitably to the examination of the *social* processes through which individuals *come to be adjudged* 'competent', in a manner which has 'felicitous' social consequences, ie entry into, and 'success' in, relevant social arenas such as graduate employment and managerial positions. These social processes will be considered in the next chapter.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to clear up conceptual confusions relating to learning and to skill and competence. These terms are, it was argued, systematically ambiguous and so require careful consideration before assuming they maintain the same meaning in different contexts, or, as Wittgenstein (1953) would put it, we should 'look and see' what 'language game' is in operation. Ryle's (1949) arguments with regard to disposition statements were deployed, and consequently 'learning' (as a verb in the present tense) was shown to be *not an activity word* but an *achievement* word. Similarly, statements which have the word 'learnt' (as past tense of verb) and cognates such as 'competent', were shown to be semi-hypotheticals, to explain or express some prediction or retrodiction concerning performance. The technical use of the concepts, in policy discourse and in scientific psychology carry 'theoretical luggage' which render such use of little value in understanding the use of the terms in the areas of concern in this thesis. Finally, Austin's (1962) distinction between

constatives and performatives was applied to statements of the form which declared that a person was competent, in formal settings in education and employment. It was argued that such statements were best seen as performative, or quasi-performative, rather than constative; they were a form of verdictive. This raises issues concerning the social processes relating to the conventions under which such statements as (quasi-) performative may be considered in respect of their 'felicity'.

Such analysis undermines the conventional model of learning and skill. The next chapter will move on from this conceptual analysis to begin to build an alternative to the conventional model.

Chapter 8

The Interpretation of Activity as Performance:

Practices and Identity

8.1 Introduction

It was argued in the previous chapter that the term 'learn', and its various derivative forms ('learning', 'learnt', 'learner', etc), are systematically ambiguous; so too, it was argued, are the terms 'learning outcome', 'skill', 'competence', and cognates. The meaning of these terms differs according to the context of their use, their various 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1953). We are concerned in this thesis with the contexts which the learning and skills agenda claims to address, that is,

- the relationship between higher education and post-graduation employment, and
- the relationship between management education, training and development and entry to managerial positions.

Using Ryle's (1949) arguments regarding statements of dispositions, it was argued that a statement that someone is competent (has a competence, has a skill, has learned such-and-such, and so on) is a semi-hypothetical, an inference claim used to explain, retrodict or predict some behaviour or performance by that person. Following Austin (1962), rather than to be viewed as *descriptions* about some purportedly state of affairs, it was argued, speech acts through which statements about the competence of individuals are best understood as examples of a type of *performatives* (or, at least,

'quasi-performatives'), ie as *verdictives*. That is, when we say that so-and-so is 'competent', or use similar language, we are expressing a judgement which implies a semi-hypothetical statement about how the person might be expected to behave under certain (specified or unspecified) circumstances. Such an analysis indicates the necessity to consider the nature of behaviour *as a matter of social significance.*

In this chapter, the arguments will be taken on from the conceptual matters addressed in the previous chapter to examine how, in social settings, judgements are made about any individual's competence. This will start from the approach of ethogenics (Harré and Secord, 1972) for reconstructing the meta-theoretical foundations of social psychology. Harré and Secord, following Austin's analysis of speech acts (Austin, 1962), argue that the analysis of *social* behaviour must take account of the distinction between *movement, actions and acts,* a distinction which is elided by the conventional model of learning and competence in addressing issues of the observability or otherwise of performance. The conditions identified by Austin (1962: 14ff) for 'felicity' of performative speech acts are drawn upon by ethogenics to establish a general rule-role model for the analysis of 'social episodes' and their act-action structures. However, it will be argued that our analytical concern in this thesis is with the *interpretation*, or construal, of behaviour as actions (called here 'activity') and as acts (called here 'performance') *by the various social actors within social settings*.

The contribution to our understanding of the interpretative, interactional and constructional nature of the social world, from a range of approaches within sociology and social psychology, will be considered. These will be shown to be 'convivial' with the ethogenics approach and, whilst not reducible to a single corpus, to share similar

meta-theoretical standpoints; the term 'relational' will be adopted to refer to such approaches. The rule-role model will be developed to construct a model of the situated process of interpretation/ construal of activity as performance, based on:

(1) the selection from an assumed set of socially recognisable *practices* appropriate to that situation, such that the activity is taken to be an instantiation of one or more practices within that set; and

2) identification of the person as being appropriate to the situation.

This *practice-identity* model will be considered in terms of the relative importance of each of the two elements in different types of social situations, such that educational and employment-related contexts may be distinguished from ceremonials and from mundane routines.

The model will be further considered in respect of the extent to which performance may be specified such that the interpretation/ construal of activity as performance is likely to be routine and uncontested. It will be argued that there is a direct relationship between the degree of specification and the salience of practice, but an inverse relationship between the degree of specification and the salience of identity. Because there is generally a low degree of specification of performance in relation to *higher-level skill and* competence, issues of identity have a high degree of salience. Such issues of identity will be the focus of the following chapter.

8.2 Ethogenics and the explanation of human behaviour

We have a variety of terms for human 'doing', the main ones probably being 'behaviour', 'activity', 'action', 'conduct', 'performance'[1]. The term 'behaviour' has

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1 Schutz (1945) uses and distinguishes between these terms, adding 'working' to refer to overt action requiring bodily movement

been favoured within psychology since Watson (1913) proposed that, in order to be a field of scientific study, psychology should restrict its subject matter to behaviour which is *objectively observable*, that is, in terms of bodily movements and bodily emissions which can be counted, measured and so on[2]. Through the methodology of experimentation, law-like connections between external stimuli and the behaviour (response) of the 'organism' under investigation were claimed. Where experimentation is not feasible, for practical or for ethical reasons, the methods of psychometrics (Cronbach, 1957) were adopted:

> "Psychometric psychology deals mostly with tests and measures aimed at linking behaviour in one situation (for example, filling in an intelligence test) to behaviour in another (for example, school success)."
> (Van Langenhove, 1995: 16)

As noted in chapter 3, from the 1960s cognitive psychology began to displace behaviourist psychology as the dominant paradigm, such that explanation was sought for the non-observable mental or 'cognitive' processes deemed to be significant in mediating between stimuli and behavioural response (Eysenck, 1986). However, the assumption remained that behaviour was objectively observable, and arose through automatic 'information-processing' connections between 'input' and 'output' (Hamlyn, 1990).

Harré and Secord (1972) argue that, irrespective of the success or otherwise of research within these approaches[3], there are problems with their theoretical and

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2 Watson's concern was to eliminate the use of the method of introspection, which he deemed to be unreliable. Hamlyn (1953: 139) argues that behaviourism was introduced by Watson as a *methodological* postulate, and only later become a metaphysical theory.

3 The focus of the critique by Harré and Secord is that of experimentalist behaviourism, which had only recently, at the time of their book, begun to be eclipsed by cognitivism. However, both authors subsequently include cognitivism in their critique (eg Harré et al, 1985; Secord, 1997).

methodological foundations, notably the mechanistic model of human beings, the Humean conception of causation as correlation, and logical positivist basis of methodology. In fact, they argue, these do not accord with the principles underlying sound scientific endeavour even in the natural sciences. Harré and Secord therefore seek to develop

> "a systematic and unified theoretical account of the new ways of thinking about people, and the new methods of studying their behaviour, which are becoming increasingly dominant in the human sciences."
> (Harré and Secord, 1972: v)

That account is understandably complex, they stress, given the complexity and difficulty of the phenomena to be understood. Moreover, as their analysis is wide-ranging, we shall here draw selectively upon their analysis, as it relates to the purpose of this thesis.

We noted in the previous chapter the distinction which Hamlyn (1953) makes between what he translates from Aristotle as 'movement' and 'activity'. Harré and Secord (1972) present a three-fold conceptual distinction, between *movement, action*, and *acts*[4], which must be taken into account in analysing social episodes in which we are concerned with 'things done *by* a person' (as opposed to 'things done *to* a person', which is the fundamental concept of Skinnerian methodology) (Harré and Secord, 1972: 148). They argue as follows:

> "A person makes all sorts of bodily movements in the course of an episode, contracting and relaxing muscles in various sequences. Some of these movements can be seen or heard of felt by others, some are known to others only through their effects. Some of these *movements* we wish to treat as *actions*, and in some of these actions we see *acts* performed. We watch a man's hand move towards the extended fourth finger of the hand of a woman and slip a gold ring on that finger. If this movement meets certain criteria it is an action in the performing of which, together with certain other actions, a

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4 Harré and Secord refer to the contribution of linguistic philosophy, and would seem to be drawing upon Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (see Harré, 1981: 15)

> marriage is achieved, that is, an act is performed. A *movement* is given *meaning* as an *action* by being identified as the performance or part of the performance of an *act*."
> (Harré and Secord, 1972: 158)

They further point out that the act referred to, a marriage, may be performed by various actions, such as, amongst gypsies, holding hands and jumping over a fire then smashing a glass. There is thus no one-to-one correspondence between actions and acts. Harré et al. (1985) gives the example of smiling, a physical behaviour which may be a greeting, a threat, an apology, and so on:

> "Which act it represents on a particular occasion will depend on the overall definition of the encounter into which it fits and the kind of actions by which we can perform the same act."
> (Harré, et al.,1985: 83)

The movement-action-act distinction is used by Harré and Secord as the basis for their theoretical and methodological approach to social psychology. Their orientation is that of the analyst of human conduct in social episodes, particularly in terms of separating *causal* explanations from those in which accounts are presented in terms of *reasons*. Our concern in this thesis is with a more restricted range of episodes, in that the focus is upon how the various *participants to particular situations* interpret, or construe, the behaviour of the individual in question, in relation to the attribution or otherwise of skill, competence, and so on, and to the assumed process of achieving such skill etc. That is, we are less concerned directly with the nature of the behaviour (as movement, action, and/ or act) as it may be analysed for particular purposes[5], and more concerned with how, in the particular social situations of concern (ie educational and occupational), those who are involved develop their

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5 For some purposes, such as *medical* treatment, it may be more appropriate to treat an individual's behaviour in terms of its causation, rather than as action in the performance of some act.

understanding of how an individual's behaviour is to be understood. This is addressed by Harré and Secord in terms of *negotiation* of accounts of such episodes by those who are involved (Harré and Secord, 1972: 235ff).

The key issues here may be illustrated by the following scenario, drawing upon an example briefly referred to by Harré and Secord (op.cit: 159):

> At an auction, the auctioneer brings down the gavel and states that a particular lot has just been sold to the customer in the blue check suit, for £7500. Immediately, that customer shouts out 'But I didn't bid for it!' The auctioneer replies: 'But I saw you raise your hand - I took that as indicating a bid, and no-one bid afterwards. It's yours; you must pay the £7500'. The customer retorts: 'But I was just waving to my friend who was leaving.'

The question arises as to whether or not the customer has made a bid (performed an act). That the customer has moved his arm upward is not in doubt; however, if the customer denied such movement, a video recording might provide objective evidence. So in the Harré and Secord approach, the analysis hinges on the act-action relationship, consideration of which would include the accounts given by the customer, auctioneer and third parties (other customers and other auction house staff) , and of the type of episode which characterises an auction, its rules and so on. In the scenario presented, there is clearly a discrepancy between such accounts, although there is the possibility that the customer might have accepted that a bid had been made. Harré and Secord present other possible resolutions, through which the various parties achieve a degree of 'concordance' through modifying their accounts (p. 237).

'Negotiation' is thus taken by Harré and Secord to mean that some form of agreement is achieved. However, we should note that there is a further possibility which they do not consider: that no such agreement is reached and the matter is taken outside of the immediate context, for example by the instigation of some form of legal proceedings

to enforce payment or declare the auction house's demand for payment null and void. That is, resolution of the 'negotiation' may implicate aspects of the institutional order rather than be restricted to the interactional order[6].

In respect of our concern in this thesis, that of higher level skill and learning, the interpretation/ construal of movements and actions (or movement-actions) as acts of particular kinds is of central importance. As the term 'performance' is more commonly used in the competence movement, has figured significantly in our conceptual analysis of learning based on Ryle's arguments, and is used by Harré and Secord in respect of acts, we shall use that term here contrasting it with 'activity' which will be used of action[7] that is subject to interpretation. The basic model may be displayed as in figure 8.1. What counts as performance in any situation involves some process of interpretation of the activity as *performance-of-a-particular-kind* eg a bid at an auction (or a wave of farewell) in the scenario presented above.

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6 cf Giddens' emphasis upon the interlacing of meaning, normative elements and power, as implied in the identification of acts or aspects of interaction (Giddens, 1984: 28ff).

7 Or, more precisely, *movement* that has been interpreted as (intentional) action, the question now concerning the *act* that the movement-action is construed to be.

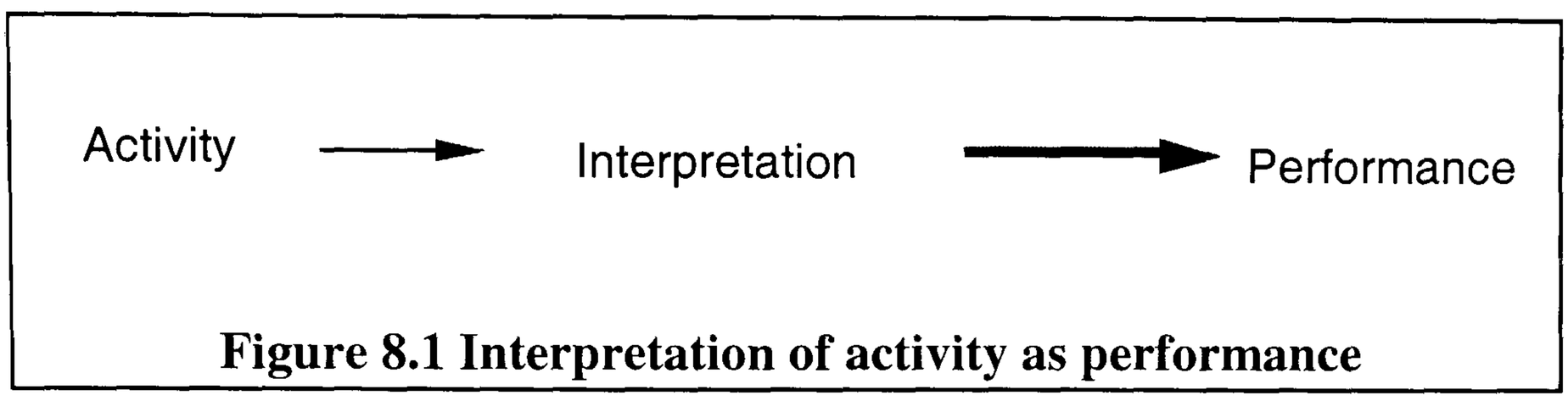

Figure 8.1 Interpretation of activity as performance

The issue which we must now address is that of the nature of the process of interpretation; on what basis is any instance of situated activity interpreted as performance of a particular kind? Harré and Secord (1972) distinguish analytically between three types of episodes: formal, causal and enigmatic. Formal episodes are those which are explicable by

> "reference to explicit rules in accounting for the sequence and type of the actions performed, eg a marriage is explained by reference to the litany."
> (op.cit: 149-150)

For causal episodes

> "[r]eference is made to physiological, chemical or physical mechanisms in accounting for the sequence and type of happenings, eg gestation and parturition."
> (op.cit: 150)

However, most episodes of social life are, they contend, 'enigmatic' ie they do not clearly relate to well-established conventions or to well-founded knowledge of causal mechanisms (op.cit: 171). They argue that, in contrast to the relatively dominant approach within social psychology whereby the causal model is adopted, such enigmatic episodes should be understood by taking formal episodes as the general form. In support of this, they refer to the tendency for this in the work of Wittgenstein (1953) and Schwayder (1965) in philosophy, and Goffman (1959a) and Garfinkel (1967) in sociology.

Harré and Secord argue that formal episodes are to be understood in terms of rules which guide action in the performance of acts.

> "Rules guide action through the actor being aware of the rule and of what it prescribes, so that he can be said to know what to do in the appropriate circumstances by virtue of his knowledge of the rule, and the explanation of his knowing what to do lies in his knowing the rule and being able to recognise the occasions for its application."
> (Harré and Secord, 1972:181)

Rules are 'future directed', and thus not only guide action but determine expectations the behaviour of others who accept the rule. Rules are also propositional, enabling them to be included in accounts of and commentaries on action (op.cit: 182). The concept of 'rule' is also related to that of 'role', which arises from consideration of rules in relation to people who follow them.

> "Role can be defined as that part of the Act-action structure produced by the subset of rules followed by some individual defined as belonging to a particular category of person."
> (op.cit: 183)

From this analysis, Harré and Secord develop the notion of Role-rule models, as the basis for analysing formal episodes which, as indicated, also serve as the preferred basis for attempting the analysis also of enigmatic episodes.

A particular type of formal episode is that which Harré and Secord term 'ceremonials', "such as marriages, coronations, baptisms, the delivering of verdicts and the like" (p. 185). They draw upon Austin's analysis of the conditions to be met for a performative utterance to be 'felicitous', the function 'happily'. It is worth quoting Austin's text here:

> "(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further
> (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
> (B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
> (B.2) completely."
> (Γ.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct by any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact case have such thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
> (Γ.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently."
> (Austin, 1962: 14ff)

Harré and Secord argue that the first set (of two) conditions relate to rules and roles

respectively. The second set (B.1 and B.2) provide the conditions by which the episode may be said to have been performed, ie their breach would signify failure to perform the act. The final two conditions lie outside the rule and role-conventions of the formal episode, becoming operative, Harré and Secord argue, when the episode is seen as a sub-episode in "a wider slice of life".

Harré and Secord also examine the structure of formal episodes which they refer to as the 'game model', such that there may be variation in the *particular forms* of action, and the outcome is determined by the 'play' rather than by the rules. This model need not concern us here, for the general rule-role structure of episodes still applies.

8.3 Micro-sociological perspectives

At this juncture we shall turn to '*micro-sociological*' perspectives which may be viewed as convivial with the ethogenics approach, and contribute to our understanding of the nature of human behaviour, and thus of judgements in respect of learning and competence. Harré and Secord (1972) clearly viewed their work as a contribution to the discipline of *psychology*, and each has, in their later work, continued to address audiences primarily within the discipline (eg Harré, 1995; Secord, 1997). However, the matters with which they are concerned have also been the focus of what is often referred to as 'micro-sociology', or a sociological analysis of 'micro' level aspects of society (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981; Giddens, 1984; Layder, 1994), which seeks to understand human social behaviour at the level of individuals interacting in 'on-going' daily life. The borderline between micro-*sociology* and social *psychology* is not

easily drawn[8], and is of no significant consequence for our purposes here. The focus here is on how, in social settings in which the notions of 'learning', 'skill', 'competence', and so on are of significance and consequence, the behaviour (conduct, activity, actions, etc) of individuals is understood by those engaged in those social settings.

We shall consider here the contribution of two main approaches within micro-sociology, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, to our understanding of human behaviour. These will be shown to have a significant degree of 'conviviality' with the ethogenics approach of Harré and Secord (1972), and thus to support the analysis which will follow.

8.4 Symbolic interactionism

The key principles of symbolic interactionism have been laid out by a number of writers (eg Rose, 1962; Blumer, 1969; Meltzer, et al. 1975). Blumer's is the most concise, with three 'simple premises' being presented as the basis, 'in the last analysis':

> "The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them. [...] The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters."
> (Blumer, 1969: p.2)

He glosses the word 'things' as including 'world-physical objects', categories of human beings, institutions, guiding ideals, activities of others, and "such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life" (ibid.). It is not the intention here to engage

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[8] For example, Manis and Metzer (1967) subtitle to their edited collection of texts on symbolic interaction as 'A Reader in Social Psychology'; in their Preface they refer to the contributions as having influenced 'most American *sociologists* specializing in social *psychology*' (emphasis added).

in a detailed discussion and analysis of symbolic interactionism itself, of the divergent approaches within the tradition, or of contestations over its origins (see Meltzer, et al.1975; Manis and Meltzer, 1972; Denzin, 1992; Layder, 1994). Rather, the aim here is to note some of the key issues which are significant in respect of our concern with learning, skill and competence. The first key point is the emphasis upon *meaning* in any attempt understand and analyse human behaviour and action. From this there is the recognition of how meaning, and therefore social life, is joint accomplishment, ie arising through interaction. The third issue to be examined is that of the notion of the 'self', and the concept of role and associated notions.

Blumer emphasises the importance of *meaning* in the study of human behaviour:

> "To ignore the meaning of the things towards which people act is seen as falsifying the behaviour under study. To bypass the meaning in favour of factors alleged to produce the behaviour is seen as grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behaviour."
> (Blumer, 1969: p.3)

This may be seen as a fundamental principle of symbolic interactionism, the key point on which the approach may be distinguished from the structural-functionalist tradition in sociology, and with positivistic social science in general. The implication of this is that the attempt by the conventional model of learning and skill to explain work performance in terms of 'factors' which produce it, ie learning, skills, competence, etc cannot succeed as this 'falsifies' the behaviour under study. It is necessary to include the individual's own understanding (meaning) of that behaviour.

Moreover, secondly, the individual will modify their behaviour in interaction with others:

> "as individuals acting individually, collectively, or as agents of some organization encounter one another they are necessarily required to take account of the actions of one another as they form their own action. They do

> this by a dual process of indicating to others how to act and interpreting the indications made by others."
> (Blumer, 1969: p.10)

Human activity, both as individual conduct and as joint action, thus arises and is formed "in and through this ongoing process" (ibid.) 'designation and interpretation' (op.cit. p.17). This point is vital, according to Blumer, and the failure to take account of it

> "constitutes the fundamental deficiency of schemes that seek to account for human society in terms of social organization or psychological factors, or of any combination of the two. By virtue of symbolic interaction, human group life is necessarily a formative process and not a mere arena for the expression of pre-existing factors."
> (Blumer, 1969: p.10)

Whilst in much of settled social life there is often repetition of pre-established joint action, all instances of joint action have, according to Blumer, to be formed anew, as the participants "still have to build up their lines of action and fit them to one another" (p.18). It is the use of recurrent and constant meanings which gives rise to such repetition of joint action, and to 'extended connections of actions'.

Thirdly, for our purposes here, we must also consider the notions of the 'self' and of 'role' in the symbolic interactionist approach. As with Cooley's (1902) earlier notion of 'the looking glass self', Mead's concept of the self was based on the recognition that a human being can view themself as an object, as a 'me'. A person can thus engage in a reflexive process, that is "take the attitude of the other toward himself" (Mead, 1934/ 1962: 134), and so take account of others' interpretations in their own activity. The two analytically separate aspects of self, 'I' and 'me', may be viewed as two phases in *the self as social process*:

> "The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases."
> (1934/ 1962: 178)

Initially arising in interaction with discrete 'significant others', the child's self

develops in relation to the 'generalised other', that is, the attitude of the social group:

> "Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group is engaged, does he develop a complete self."
> (Mead, 1934/ 1962: 155)

In this way, individuals are able to evaluate themselves from the attitude of the generalised other rather than from particular, discrete others, and so gain some abstract and objective view. An individual's behaviour in social settings therefore implicates the self as social process, such that the 'attitude of the other' is a vital element in how behaviour arises and develops in interaction. Within any social setting, taking the attitude of the other involves recognition of the set of expectations about how the individual should act, the 'role definition'. By acting in accordance with such expectations, the individual is said to be 'role playing' or 'role taking'.

The notion of role took a more structural and positivistic form in the Iowa School of symbolic interactionism than in the work of others associated with the Chicago School (Meltzer, et al, 1975; MacKinnon, 1994). MacKinnon (1994: 85) distinguishes between *role playing* and *role making*; the former refers to the individual's "more or less preconscious and automatic enactment of socially prescribed roles", whereas the latter is "a self-conscious and creative process of constructing performances within the loose organizing framework of a role". Turner (1962) distinguishes between an approach to role theory which *start* from the assumption of the existence of discrete and identifiable roles, and the approach (which he adopts) that starts by observing the basic tendency for people to act *as if* there were roles. Whilst "roles 'exist' in varying degrees of concreteness and consistency"

> "the individual confidently frames his behaviour as if they had unequivocal existence and clarity. The result is that in attempting from time to time to make aspects of the roles explicit he is creating and modifying roles as well

> as merely bringing them to light; the process is not only role-taking but *role-making*."
> (Turner, 1962: 22; emphasis in original)

Turner goes to say that military and bureaucratic behaviour should not be seen as ideal-typical, but as "a 'distorted instance' of the broader class of role-taking phenomena" (ibid.).

The meaningfulness of behaviour depends upon roles as points of reference, and separate items of behaviour can be understood only when "interpreted as the manifestation of a configuration":

> "The individual acts as if he were expressing some role through his behaviour and may assign a higher degree of reality to the assumed role than to his specific actions. The role becomes the point of reference for placing interpretations on specific actions, for anticipating one line of action will follow another, and for making evaluations of individual actions."
> (Turner, 1962: 24)

Judgements of consistency of behaviour, rather than depending upon *logical* criteria, have a 'folk basis' in respect of the "subsumability of a person's behaviour under a single role" (ibid.). Even more so, the very *intelligibility* of behaviour depends upon such criterion:

> "Behaviour is said to make sense when a series of actions is interpretable as indicating that the actor has in mind some role which guides his behaviour."
> (ibid.)

The notion of role applies to a *type of actor* rather than a type of person, such that different persons may play the same role, and an individual person may have many, sometimes conflicting, roles.

The concept of 'role' is also *relational*:

> "every role is a way of relating to other-roles in a situation. A role cannot exist without one or more relevant other-roles toward which it is oriented."
> (Turner, 1962: 23)

Moreover, any individual, in addition to the interaction with the others in their 'role set', must create a consistent whole out of their behaviour in such *simultaneous* interaction (op.cit: p.25). Furthermore, such 'role reciprocity' provides a general

explanation for changed behaviour, whereby "a change in one's own role reflects a changed assessment of perception of the role of relevant others." (p.23). Because of the tentative nature of interaction, individuals are continuously testing the understanding they have of the role of the other, and

> "the response of the other serves to reinforce or challenge this conception. The product of the testing process is the stabilization or modification of one's role."
> (ibid.)

Thus, from symbolic interactionism, there are a number of themes which are convivial with the ethogenic approach of Harré and Secord, considered above:

- that human social behaviour can only be understood if the actors' meanings are taken into account; it cannot be understood solely in terms of the effects of causal factors such as qualities, skills or competences;
- human social behaviour is interactional and iterative - individuals respond to the actions of others in terms of their understandings of those actions (ie the meanings they attribute to them), each modifying their own actions in a continuing process; there can be no simple expectation of a correspondence between an individual's behaviour in one situation and that which arises in another situation;
- to attribute consistency to a person's social behaviour, there needs to be a set of expectations of the *type of actor* the person is within the situation, ie their role, and the relation of that role to the roles of significant others; understanding of a person's behaviour depends upon the ascription of a relevant role, as well as upon observed or presumed behaviour;
- the individual does not merely act according to prescribed role expectations,

but engages actively in *role-making*, which is part of the ongoing, iterative process of interaction; understanding of a person's behaviour requires an understanding of the interaction between that person's own efforts at role-making and the ascriptions of significant others.

8.5 Ethnomethodology

Similarly, as with symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology is concerned with the micro-level interactional production of the social world, with the everyday 'extraordinary organization of the ordinary' (Pollner, 1987). In coining the term 'ethnomethodology', Garfinkel intended to indicate distinctive character of the approach to understanding social settings. This is to focus on the ordinary, commonplace activities of daily life, treating

> "practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study..."
> (Garfinkel, 1967: 1)

Such mundane activity is treated as a skilled accomplishment, in which the parties to social interaction, the 'collectivity members' (op.cit., 57fn; 76 fn), engage in procedures for making their behaviour explicable or 'account-able'. In doing so, the These 'folk' (*ethno*-) methods are treated by ethnomethodology as identical with the very activities by which everyday social life is accomplished:

> "the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'account-able'."
> (Garfinkel, 1967: 1)

By 'accountable' he means observable-and-reportable, which the situated practices of looking and telling make available to members in the very same settings that they describe; they are thereby also available for empirical study by 'professional' sociologists.

The emphasis in ethnomethodology on *accounting practices* has clear

implications for our concern with learning and skill in relation to entry to and activity within education and occupational settings. The conventional model focusses primarily upon the 'learners', but ethnomethodologists would be concerned with the various 'collectivity members' and their accounting practices. Thus, rather than treating statements by teachers and trainers about learners being 'competent', having 'learned', 'possessing skills' and so on, as if these were objective descriptions, the ethnomethodological approach would examine how such statements are used in accounting for the practices of teaching, assessing, awarding grades and so on. Moreover, such accounting is undertaken not only with each other (as in, eg, formal situations such as examination board meetings, as well as everyday activities of planning lessons and engaging with students during classes); it also takes place in interaction with students, with external actors and agencies concerned with educational matters, and with actors and agencies involved with recruitment into employment arenas. Similarly, for example, graduate recruitment personnel may be seen as engaging in accounting practices in presenting as understandable the activities in which they engage in selecting and rejecting various applicants (Silverman and Jones, 1973).

Garfinkel emphasises two aspects of accounting that distinguish ethnomethodology from more general interpretivist social science. First, because accounts are features of the social settings in which they are used, all accounts are *indexical*; that is, their meaning is tied to the context and circumstances of their use, and understanding requires knowledge of the specifics of the situation (Garfinkel, 1967: 4-7). Indexical expressions differ from the formal or 'objective' expressions which are required for scientific discourse. Garfinkel argues that whilst there are

occasions where objective expressions may be substituted for indexical expressions, this can only be '*programmatic*' and '*for practical purposes*' . This implicates the demonstration of the appropriateness of such substitution within the 'professional practices of socially managed demonstration'.

Applying this to our concerns with learning and skills we can say that the substitution of an 'objective expression' (eg using skills terms) for an indexical (eg that a particular individual has performed in a particular manner on a particular occasion) can only be done for particular practical purposes (eg the award of a qualification). Thus a statement that someone has (demonstrated) a particular skill has to be seen as indexing particular features of its use (who says it, about whom, in what context, for what purpose?).

Indexicality would seem to require that, for shared meaning, each of the parties engaged in interaction relies upon the other party to have knowledge of the particular features of the situation indexed. However, Garfinkel argues and attempts to demonstrate from his studies that shared meaning is a social accomplishment, whereby intelligibility involves viewing some action as according-to-a-rule.

> "'Shared meaning' refers to various social methods for accomplishing the members' recognition that something was said-according-to-a-rule and not the demonstrable matching of substantive matters. The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than a common intersection of overlapping sets."
> (Garfinkel, 1967: 30).

Garfinkel reports on studies undertaken with his students, "not properly speaking experimental" but as 'demonstrations' designed as "aids to sluggish imagination"[9] (op.cit. p.38). When asked to document a conversation they had had with someone, and then write for each part of the conversation what the party concerned understood,

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9 Garfinkel takes the phrase from Herbert Spiegelberg, but provides no reference.

the students found some difficulty. However, the difficulty increased when Garfinkel progressively required more accuracy, clarity and distinctness, the task became much more difficult and laborious. However, the students did not complain about lack of time, paper, stamina etc, nor did they complain that he was engaging in pedantry. What they did complain was that each request for clarity etc increased the amount of information that could be supplied, so that the conversation became a "branching texture of relevant matters".

> "The very *way* of accomplishing the task multiplied its features."
> (Garfinkel, 1967: 26)

Similarly, with the notorious 'breaching' studies, in which students were asked to spend a period of time at home imagining themselves to be boarders and acting so, thus disrupting normal social procedures. A key outcome that was of interest for Garfinkel was how other members of the family sought to cope with the situation, often through providing explanations to each other or asking questions of the student, eg 'Are you sick?', 'Did you get fired?' (op.cit., p.47). In many cases, explanations were provided in relation to previously understood situations, eg the student has quarrelled with her fiancé, or was working too hard. Understanding is, for Garfinkel, a practical task, the performance of sensemaking work, rather than the application of already-held meanings.

Much of everyday interaction is not clear to the participants to interaction as it occurs. The interaction can only continue if the participants allow it to do so in the absence of completeness, by the application of the '*et cetera principle*' . Each participant allows the interaction to continue on the assumption that the situation will become clear if allowed to continue, and assumes that the other participants also allow

this. Meaning is thus produced in the interaction through the methods for continuing the interaction, rather than existing at the beginning and continuing throughout. Garfinkel refers to the *'documentary method'* by which an underlying pattern is assumed to lay behind the appearances of the interaction, such that each part of the interaction may be seen as 'documenting' or 'pointing to' that underlying pattern. As the interaction progresses, the participants can draw upon existing 'documentary evidence' as providing an interpretation of what *could* be the underlying pattern, which may be used in interpreting the documentary evidence which arises in the interaction.

Ethnomethodology cannot be reduced to social interactionism, nor vice versa. However, there are clearly areas of commonality with regard to the issues under consideration in this thesis. These include the emphasis upon the micro-level as the basis upon which the social world may be examined and explanation sought, and the interactional and iterative nature of the (re)production of the social. Garfinkel extends the emphasis on the micro-level in terms of *indexicality*, the implications of which, as has been argued, undermine the idea that 'objective expressions' such as performance standards and standardised 'measures' of skills may be applied meaningfully across the varied range of situated activity.

8.6 Social constructionism and the relational perspective

In the discussion so far, we have emphasised that human social behaviour, that is behaviour which has social significance, cannot be objectively observed but, on the contrary, requires some process of interpretation. Such interpretation depends on the attribution of *meaning* and *significance* to what a person does or persons do. We can also say that the interpretation or construal of behaviour is itself a form of behaviour,

and thus subject to the same principle. From this it follows that there can be no *objective* grounds on which to base the claim to validity of any specific interpretation of any instance of behaviour, that the particular meaning and significance attributed to such behaviour is 'correct' or 'true'. Put more generally, what we take as 'reality' is *socially constructed* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Berger and Luckmann emphasise that their concern is not with questions about the 'ultimate status' of what is taken to be 'reality' and 'knowledge', which they regard as the concern of philosophy[10], but rather with the *sociology of knowledge*, that is

> "the empirical variety of 'knowledge' in human societies [and] with the processes by which *any* body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established *as* 'reality'."
> (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 15)

They cite a wide variety of thinkers who have sought to examine issues arising from "the social foundations of values and world views" (op. cit.: 17), including Mannheim who coined the term 'relationism', as opposed to 'relativism', to refer to the idea that all knowledge must be knowledge from a particular position. Mannheim emphasised the importance in the sociology of knowledge of avoiding a separation of 'false' claims to knowledge, 'ideology', from 'true' claims to knowledge. He posits two possible approaches to the sociology of knowledge that recognises 'the prevalence situated determination' of knowledge, by regarding this as absolute and ineradicable, or by recognising such situational determination in particular settings and seeking to 'neutralise'and 'rise above' it. The first

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10 As we saw in the previous chapter, such a view of philosophy is challenged in the work of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin, who, in emphasising language *as a social practice*, seem to come close to the concerns of the forms of social scientific analysis discussed here.

> "would require revision of the theoretical basis of knowledge by setting up the thesis of the inherently relational structure of human knowledge (just as the essentially perspectival nature of visually perceived objects is admitted without question)."
> (Mannheim, 1936: 269)

The second approach involves "discovering the element of situational determination in the views at hand" as the starting point to overcoming it:

> "[as] soon as I identify a view which sets itself up as absolute, as representing merely a given angle of vision, I neutralize its partial nature in a certain sense."
> (op. cit.: 271)

This is the route by which there may be a continuing broadening of knowledge, involving increasing abstraction and formalisation. Mannheim indicates his agnosticism as to which of the alternatives will enable a 'scientific theory of knowledge' to develop (op. cit.: 274).

Recognition of what Mannheim calls 'situational determination' has been influential in recent psychological theorising and research, in what is variously termed 'social constructionist', 'discursive', 'dialogical', 'cultural' or 'narrative' psychology[11] (Smith et al., 1995). In an early paper, Gergen states that

> "Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live."
> (Gergen, 1985: 266)

Critiquing both behaviourism and cognitive psychology, he argues that

> "Rather than looking toward the natural sciences and experimental psychology for kinship, an affinity is rapidly sensed with a range of what may be termed *interpretive disciplines*, that is, disciplines chiefly concerned with rendering accounts of human meaning systems."
> (op. cit.: 270; emphasis in original)

Gergen later developed his analysis to emphasise the processes of *relating*, that is, what counts as reality is the outcome of the communicative relationships between

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11 It is not intended to indicate here that these constitute a unified paradigm, merely that they share similar assumptions regarding the nature of what should be regarded as the matters for study with psychology.

humans (Gergen, 1994). Similarly, Shotter emphasises the '*conversational*', '*rhetorical-responsive*' nature of the continuing production of the social world (Shotter, 1993).

Dachler and Hosking adopt the term 'relational perspective' in emphasising "the primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities" (Dachler and Hosking, 1995: 1)[12]. They contrast this with "possessive individualism"[13], the view that there is a 'knowing individual', understood as an entity, and that

> "individual possessions, including certain interests and goals, are the ultimate origins of the design and control of internal nature and external nature, including other people or groups."
> (op. cit.: 2ff)

The relational perspective considers the processes by which action is socially co-ordinated through shared meanings and shared understanding, not in terms of 'overlapping substantive content' but as

> "usually implicit agreements about a set of interrelated narratives that serve as an interpretive context"
> (op. cit.: 6)

Such narratives include those concerning self, other and relationships.

Within such a perspective, it is clear that notions of 'learning', 'competence' and 'skill' would be subject to the 'neutralising' of which Mannheim speaks. These have their meaning in relation to the processes of social co-ordination, within the 'running texts' (Dachler and Hosking, 1995) of the particular settings in which such terms have social salience. These settings, and the narratives or 'running texts' which are drawn upon for jointly constructing meaning, include, for our concerns in this thesis, those of education and assessment for qualifications, of recruitment for

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12 Hosking and Bouwen (2000) adopt the term 'relational-constructionism'.

13 Dachler and Hosking cite Sampson (1988) on this; the term itself was coined by Mcpherson (1962).

employment, of positions within employment contexts and within educational, assessment and selection contexts. Competence and skills are no longer viewed as the possessions of individual entities, and learning no longer viewed as a process internal to such entities.

8.7 The interpretation of performance: practice and identity

Although not reducible to a single theoretical corpus, we may note sufficient similarity between the approaches discussed above, in respect of our concern with the question of how activity is interpreted as performance in social settings. There appear to be two key conditions which apply, or interpretative resources that are drawn upon, whereby a person's activity is construed or interpreted as being performance of a particular kind. First, there is deemed to exist a set of *practices* appropriate to the situation, such that the activity may be viewed as an instantiation of a practice from that set. Second, the person whose activity is being so construed/ interpreted is deemed to have an *identity* appropriate to such a performance. Of course, these elements are not completely self-contained and separate, for the attribution of an identity to someone implicates some understanding of the practices they are likely to engage in, and practices are associated with particular identities. This may be illustrated by means of the following scenario, in an occupational setting:

> Let us suppose that, as outsiders, we accidentally enter an area of a workplace and see two individuals, whom we do not know, engaging in an interaction. One person says to the other: "Your work is really not up to scratch. Unless you pull your socks up we shall have to consider letting you go."

How would we understand what is taking place here? Most probably we would say that we are witnessing an occasion of a reprimand by the speaker of the other. The

reprimand is part of the practices of discipline within work organisational settings. The speaker is taken to be a manager (superior) addressing a subordinate employee. *However*, what would we say if we are then told that, in fact, the speaker is the subordinate employee, addressing a manager? We might now understand the situation to be one of *insubordination, misconduct*. We need to understand *both* the practices that are appropriate to the setting *and* the identities of the participants in order to understand the situation. The diagram presented in figure 8.1 might therefore be elaborated as in figure 8.2:

The term 'practices' is taken here to refer to what Schatzki (1996) terms as 'integrative', as distinct from what he terms 'dispersed'. His examples of dispersed practices are those of describing, ordering, following rules, explaining, reporting, examining and imagining; these are "widely dispersed among different sectors of social life" (Schatzki, 1996:91). In contrast, integrative practices are

> "the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life. Examples are farming practices, business practices, voting practices, teaching practices, celebration practices, cooking practices, recreational practices, industrial practices, religious practices, and banking practices."
> (op.cit: 98)

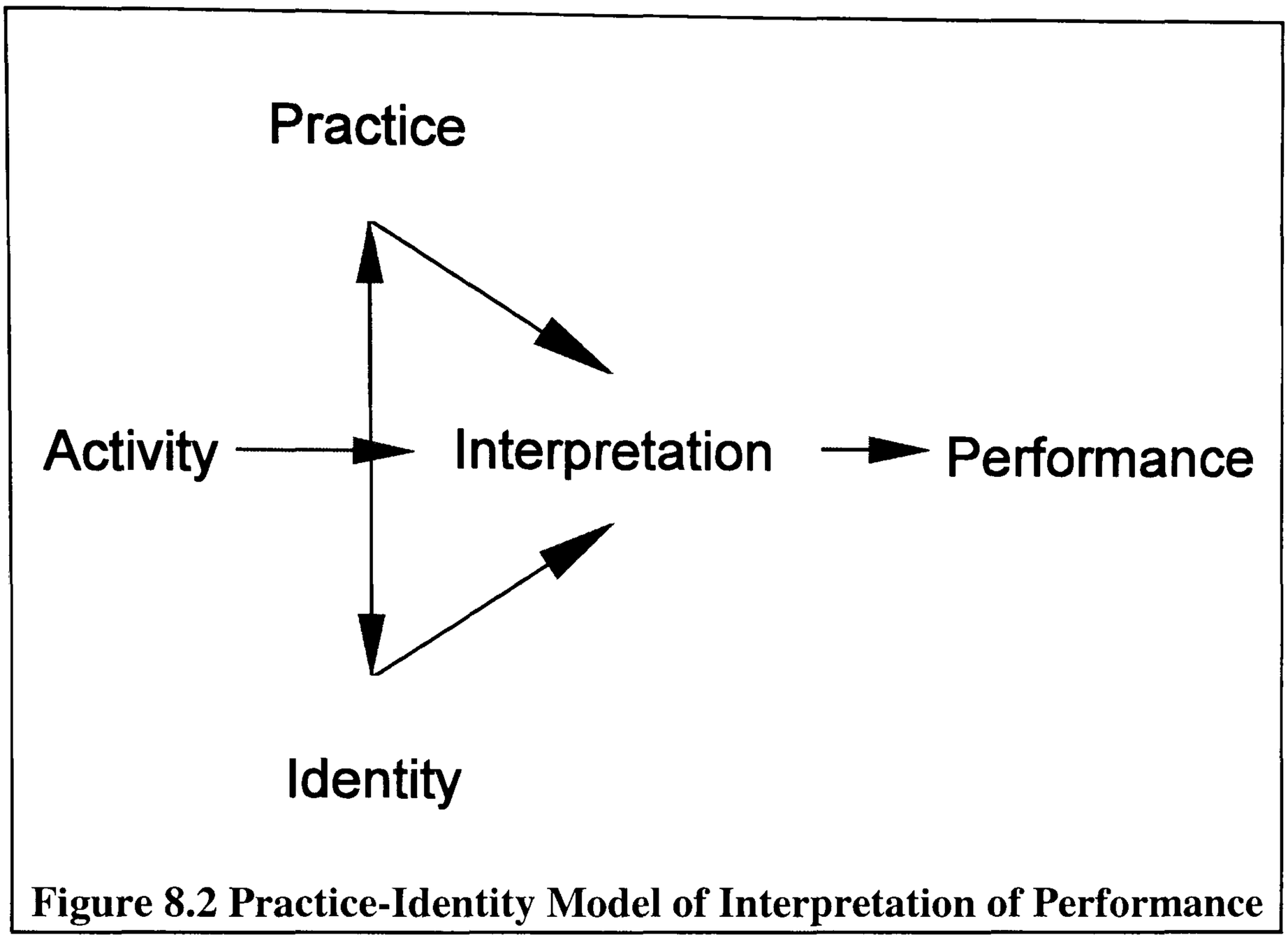

Figure 8.2 Practice-Identity Model of Interpretation of Performance

Integrative practices include various dispersed practices, but the latter are often 'transfigured' or 'transformed' by their incorporation in integrative practices; for example, questioning comprises different doings and sayings but is imbued with different meanings within the different integrative practices of legal, religious and interrogation settings (Schatzki, 1996: 99). Integrative practices also involve explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions. They also have what Schatzki terms 'teleoaffective structures', comprising hierarchies of ends, tasks, projects, beliefs, emotions, moods, and so on. Such a view of practices thus is more extensive than that of 'rules' as used by Harré and Secord (1972).

The term 'identity' is adopted here in preference to that of 'role', as used by Harré and Secord. Both terms are used by various theorists in the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological traditions (see Weigert et al, 1986). Scott and Lyman express the distinction thus:

> "The terms 'identities' and 'roles' may be used as synonymous in that roles are identities mobilized in a specific situation; whereas role is always situationally specific, identities are trans-situational."
> (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 59fn)

One way of putting this, based on the theatrical origins of the term 'role', is to say that the term 'identity' refers to the category of *person* someone is with respect to a *type* of situation, whereas 'role' refers to the specific *part they play* within a *particular* situation.

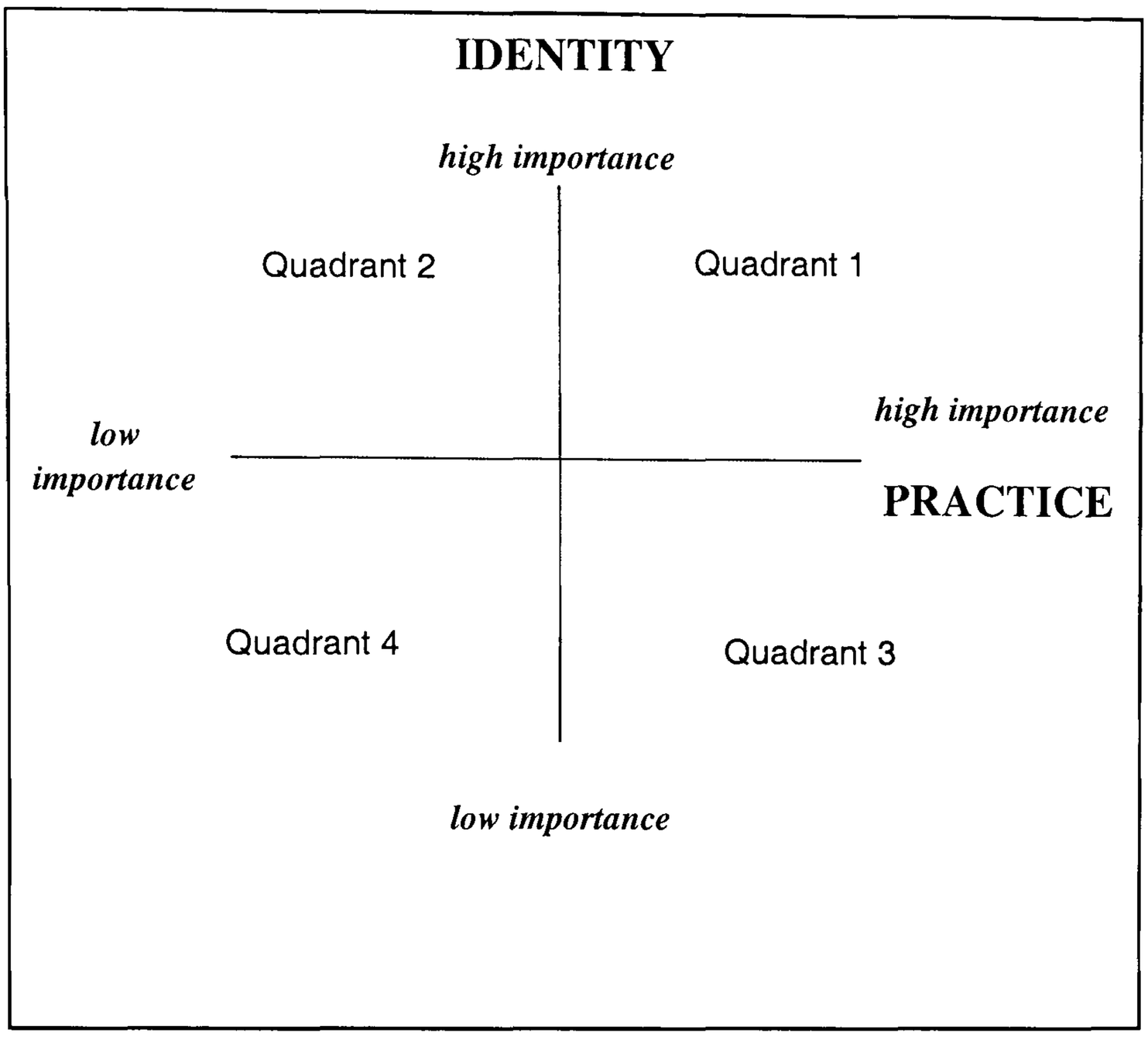

Figure 8.3 Types of Situations with Respect to Practice and Identity

Although both practice and identity are key elements in the process by which situated activity is interpreted as performance-of-a-kind, there may be variation in the relative importance placed on each in any specific situation. If the relative importance of each is viewed on a scale, and these placed as an orthogonal model with, for simplicity, four quadrants then we might note different types of social situations depicted by those quadrants (figure 8.3). Quadrant 1 (high importance for both practice and identity) would be where we would locate *ceremonials*, similar to the identification by Harré and Secord (1972), noted above, where the act-action structure is explicable in terms of the rules and roles. Thus for a marriage to be performed, the key participants (bride, groom, and officiating person) must meet the role conditions and the correct words and actions must be performed in correct sequence. Quadrant 4 (low importance for both practice and identity) is where we may locate *mundane interactions* or '*routines*'. Quadrants 2 and 3 are where we may locate situations in which the activity of a person is interpreted primarily in terms of *either* the practices deemed appropriate to the situation *or* the identity of the person. Such situations would appear to be the kind which constitute occupational settings, in relation to issues of skill and competence. That is, these have a degree of formality such that it is important to be able to say what performance is taking place, but are not so formal as to constitute ceremonials[14].

Taking the two types of situations located in quadrants 2 and 3 of figure 8.3 as being those most relevant to our concerns here with *higher-level* skill and

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14 Although, of course, there may be ceremonial occasions within occupational settings, whereby the appropriate identity/ role must be adopted by the participants and the 'correct' form of practice must be engaged in, eg address by the managing director to assembled staff.

competence, we may further consider the significance of the difference between them. Quadrant 2 represents those situations in which the interpretation of someone's activity as performance-of-a-kind is likely to be based on the *identity* of the person concerned than by reference to the set of *practices* taken to be appropriate to the situation. Quadrant 3 is the reverse, situations in which the activity is interpreted in terms of the extent to which it may be viewed as the instantiation of a practice within the set of practices taken to be appropriate, and the person's identity is of less relevance. The contention here is that, of these two types of situation, it is the *former* (quadrant 2) which applies in respect of higher-level occupational settings, and more specifically, in respect of the focus of this thesis, in the case of managerial performance and that of those employed by virtue of being graduates.

The argument for such a contention is based on the degree to which practices may be specified, such that what counts as an instantiation of practice in performance-of-a-kind is codifiable in some detail. In many occupational situations, this codifying may be undertaken to a high degree of specificity. Such codifying may be expressed linguistically, ie a set of statements of what *should* be done, to what standards; alternatively, or additionally, visual representations may be used, or representations by means of the other senses. The *product* or *outcome* of the performance may be used; for example, the standards and training materials of a chain of limited-menu restaurants would use photographs of different meals, portion control information, and so on. Alternatively, the codification may relate to the *process* by which performance is carried out, perhaps presented textually as a procedure of visually by still graphic images (eg photographs or diagrams) or by moving film or video images. In the analysis of Harré and Secord (1972), the act-action structure is such that the actions by

which an act may be performed are very limited. The codification of work performance was, of course, a key aspect of Taylor's (1911/ 1967) attempt to develop a 'true science of work' and thus of 'scientific management', critically analysed by Braverman (1974) as the final stage of the transformation of the labour process under capitalism described by Marx.

However, in some occupational settings such detailed codification is more difficult. Attempts to specify what must be done tend to be general and equivocal, using terms with broad meanings. The circumstances in which the performance is carried out, and the possible ways in which the situation may develop, will be so varied that a high level of responsiveness is required *in the performance itself.* In terms of ethnomethodology, there will be a high level of use of the 'etcetera principle', and the meaning of the activity-performance would need to be sought in the context itself, that is, its *indexicality* would need to be 'repaired' (Garfinkel, 1967). In terms of ethogenics (Harré and Secord, 1972) the act-action structure will be such that an act may be performed by a wide variety of actions. This is precisely what is found with the occupational standards for national vocational qualifications at the higher levels, where there is a high use of relative terms, such as 'appropriate', 'relevant'.

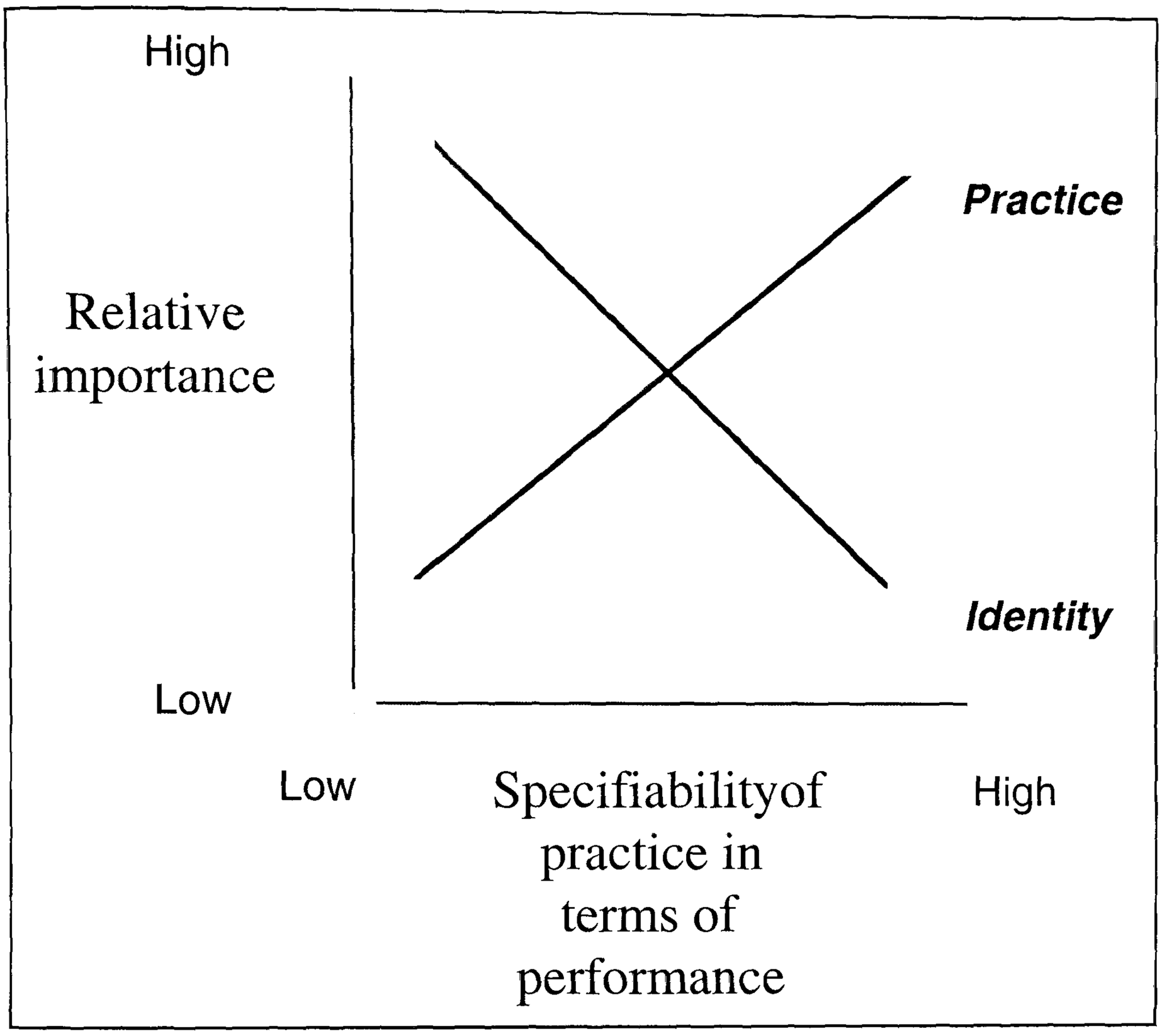

Figure 8.4 **Relative importance of practice and identity in relation to practice specifiability**

For those situations in which the practices may be relatively highly specified in activity terms, there would seem to be less need for the identity of the actor to be established in order to understand the nature of the performance. In contrast, where the practices are not so amenable to a high degree of specification, the identity of the actor becomes more important. This may be represented by figure 8.4 where the two issues, degree of specificity of practice and relative importance for interpretation of activity as performance-of-a-kind are placed orthogonally. On such an analysis, the situations where interpretation of activity as performance is highly reliant on some understanding of the identity of the actor concerned are precisely those of concern in this thesis, ie managerial and graduate occupations.

8.8 Warranting judgements: learning and competence

The above analysis may now help us to reframe our understanding of the notions of 'learning' and 'competence' (and 'skills' etc) in respect of their use in the contexts with which we are concerned in this thesis. As we saw in the previous chapter, the use of the terms should be seen *not* as descriptions of attributes of individuals, some state of affairs which may be established by objective observation of performance. Rather, the use of such terms should be regarded as *performative*, 'verdictives' in Austin's analysis (Austin, 1962), that is, as *judgements* regarding *anticipated future behaviour*. In this chapter, we have argued that human behaviour, where this is *socially consequential*, cannot be subject to objective observation; rather, '*performance*' must be construed or interpreted from '*activity*'. For this, it is necessary that there be some set of *practices* and a set of *identities* appropriate to the situation in which some specific activity is carried out, such that the activity may be interpreted as the *instantiation* of a certain practice by a person who has a *specific*

identity. Drawing upon the micro-sociological perspectives we have considered, the *relational* character of social life, we must view such interpretation as arising in the processes by which social reality is a *joint accomplishment*. As there are consequences[15] for whatever judgement is made regarding anticipated future performance, this poses issues concerning how particular interpretations are *warranted*, that is, presented as 'reasonable', 'valid', 'proper' and so on.

The notion of *warranting* is used by Toulmin (1958)[16] in his analysis of the uses of argument in terms of logical *practice*, concerning how arguments work by taking logic to be more like jurisprudence than geometry. By 'argument' Toulmin is concerned with all forms of assertions made by anyone with the intention that it should be taken seriously (ie not made frivolously, jokingly, hypothetically, or just for effect). To make such an assertion is to put forward a claim on the attention and belief of those to whom it is addressed.

> "The claim implicit in an assertion is like a claim to a right or to a title. As with a claim to a title, though it may in the event be conceded without argument, its merits depend on the merits of the argument which could be produced in its support."
> (Toulmin, 1958: 11)

In support of a claim we would normally refer to some facts; such facts may be taken as the *data*, and the claim as the *conclusion* of an argument. He argues that, in order to move from *data* to a *conclusion*, we make use of a proposition of a different type from those presenting additional information; such a proposition is general and hypothetical

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15 That is, the individual *is* or *is not* awarded a qualification, *is* or *is not* granted entry to a job and career, and so on.

16 Toulmin cites, as inspiration for his ideas, the work of Ryle and the ideas of 'licensing' and 'inference-tickets', as we discussed in the previous chapter.

in form. He refers to such propositions as *warrants*[17]; a warrant may be explicitly stated when the move from data to conclusion is questioned, or remain implicit. Toulmin also develops his analysis of arguments in terms of the use of 'qualifiers' (where the warrant is *not* presented as unequivocal but subject to certain conditions) and 'backing' (a statement that may be made in support of a warrant).

The concept of warrants, as developed by Toulmin in respect of the analysis of arguments, has been applied in respect of the analysis of 'everyday explanations' (Antaki, 1988). Draper (1988) extends Toulmin's use to refer to any support for a claim, ie any reason or belief: warrants as a major type of explanation (Draper, 1988: 22). An assertion of causation is, as Draper puts it, a 'first-rate warrant'; however, it is also an assertion of fact about the world, thus giving rise to ambiguity in respect of the meaning of an explanation expressed in terms of 'A because B'. Draper gives this example:

"He's a good producer because he used to run 'Open Door' for the BBC"

He then adduces a list of alternative interpretations of the meaning of the because-clause and its status as an explanation, *including* causation and warrant based on causation, *but also* a range of other forms of warrants (eg based on personal witness, on public knowledge, or on authority). Simplifying Draper's list we may note that the assertion may be interpreted as stating that having run 'Open Door' has resulted in the individual being a good producer, or that having run 'Open Door' serves to indicate that he is a good producer[18]. Draper points out that the resolution of the ambiguity

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17 Toulmin indicates the influence of Ryle, and makes reference to 'inference-tickets', the term used by Ryle (1949) as was discussed in chapter 6 of this thesis.

18 We may also note that the assertion contains reference to both identity (producer) and practice (running a programme).

depends on the knowledge of the interlocutors, such that explanations are relative to what is already known.

Draper's extension of Toulmin's concept of warrants has similarities with the discussion by Gergen (1989) on the role of 'warranting voice' in psychological discourse, both lay and professional (or, as he terms it, 'elaboration of the self'). He argues that it is of great importance to people that they succeed in their attempts to gain the assent of others to their own 'world construction':

> "If one's linguistic construction of the world prevails, the outcomes may be substantial. Failing to achieve intelligibility in construction is to have little role in the co-ordinated set of daily activities from which life satisfactions are typically derived."
> (Gergen, 1989: 73)

Because the range of possible constructions that may be applied in any situation is indeterminate, and as there is likely to be different preferences amongst the parties concerned as the outcomes from taking one or other construction, there may be "brisk competition over whose voice is honoured" (ibid.). So, Gergen argues,

> "one of the chief means by which voice is achieved in such wide-ranging situations is through *conventions of warrant*. That is, people furnish rationales as to why a certain voice (typically their own) is to be granted superiority by offering rationales or justifications."
> (op.cit.: 74)

He continues by arguing that reference to mental events provides "one of the most compelling and essential means of achieving warrant" (ibid.).

On this analysis, we may now see the use of the language of learning, competence, skills, and so on, in terms of warranting of judgements made in respect of future performance. Given that future performance *cannot* be predicted, known *for certain*, decisions made regarding awards of qualifications, granting of entry to occupational arenas and so on will always be subject to possible contestation. Those charged with making such decisions will therefore be concerned to be able to 'justify'

their decisions, using what are socially legitimated as forms of warranting.

Attributions of 'competence' and 'skill', as 'learning outcomes', constitute such forms of warranting in our contemporary situation[19]. This is not to say that such attributions are *merely verbal* forms of warranting, with no substance apart from the current legitimacy of the discourse of learning and competence. It is usually not enough to *say* that someone is competent and should therefore be employed (as a graduate employee or manager). Such attribution would normally require some reference to *past performance*; however, as we have seen, such past performance itself requires that there be some interpretation of activity. Practices and identity are therefore aspects of the modes of warranting judgements and decisions, of social (and personal) consequence, in the relationship between education and entry to employment.

8.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the analysis of performance based on the distinction between movement/ behaviour, action and act, and extended by reference to a range of interpretative and interactionist sociological perspectives. These have been deployed to argue that the interpretation of activity as performance has two key requirements. These are that such interpretation is made by reference to:

1) a set of practices appropriate to the type of situation, such that the activity may be taken as an instantiation of an element within that set of practices, ie as performance-of-a-kind; and

2) a set of identities or social positions appropriate to the type of situation such

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19 There are and have been, of course, other forms of warranting of such decisions. In family-owned firms, kinship with the owners may be a warrant for appointment to a senior position. The discourse of 'meritocracy' may be seen as increasing the legitimacy of warrants based on 'competence' etc, and reducing the legitimacy of warrants based on family background, gender, ethnicity and so on.

that the actor concerned has an identity or position appropriate to such performance.

Such interpretation is of social consequence in the contexts with which we are concerned in this thesis, those in which entry to occupational arenas is granted (or withheld). Judgements about anticipated future performance, and decisions regarding occupational entry, may be warranted by using the discourse of learning and competence as a *'convention of warrant'* (Gergen, 1989).

The argument has then been further elaborated in respect of the relative importance of each of these elements with respect to the degree to which practices appropriate to the type of situation. From this analysis it has been argued that, for the occupational situations with which we are concerned in this thesis, those concerned which higher level skill and learning, the identity of the person in question is of primary importance. So far, the notion of identity has not been subject to much analysis, and it is to this which the next chapter will be addressed.

Chapter 9

Emergent Identity:

Claim and Affirmation

9.1 Introduction

In chapter 7, we argued that attributions, in the contexts with which this thesis is concerned, of learning, competence, skills and so on, should be seen as judgements made about anticipated future performance. Chapter 8 argued that such judgements, and thus the decisions to grant qualifications, and entry to occupational arenas (or to deny these), are claimed and presented as 'proper', 'valid', 'reasonable' through the *convention of warrant* provided by the discourse of learning and competence. In that chapter, we presented an analysis of performance in which this was shown to involve a process of interpretation of situated activity, such interpretation relying upon the assumption of both a set of practices *and* a set of identities appropriate to the situation. It was argued that in the case of situations relevant to the issues on which this thesis is focussed, the *identity* of the actor is of vital importance because the appropriate practices were not capable of a sufficient specification on which interpretation of activity could be based. However, the notion of identity was presented in relatively simple terms, as the 'kind of person' that the actor is in the situation. This chapter will examine issues of identity, as they relate to higher level skill and learning.

However, the term 'identity' is used within a wide range of debates and discussion, in a variety of disciplinary areas. Weigert et al (1986) note that whilst the

term was unknown before the early 1940s, by the 1980s it had become

"an indispensable technical term and a cultural buzzword" such that

> "Its theoretical, empirical, and cultural importance shows no sign of abating as social scientists, clinicians, historians, psychologists, philosophers, and the media continue to apply, dispute, and develop the idea."
> (Weigert et al., 1986: 5)

Likewise, a decade later, Jenkins (1996) states that, 'identity' became

> "one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s. Everybody, it seems, has something to say about it: sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, geographers, historians, philosophers."
> (Jenkins, 1996: 7)

Debates about and related to the notion of identity, in various fields, often engage with a number of related notions, including role, the self, the person, the subject, subjectivity (and subjectivities), the agent, and agency. In addition, in that 'identity' usually connotes the individual, it is often counterposed to 'groups', 'community' and 'society'; and, as we have noted, 'agent' may be counterposed to 'structure' as alternate and/or complementary analytical bases for attempts to theorise and explain the social world.

Given such disparate and wide-ranging approaches, it is beyond the scope and outside the range of the concerns in this thesis to engage in a comprehensive analysis of issues of identity. The aim in this chapter is therefore more limited; the intention is to examine issues of identity in respect of its place in the interpretation of performance in the occupational arenas in which higher-level learning and skill are significant. Two key issues will be explored:

1) the interaction between a person's identity as the individual understand it and that as viewed by significant others;
2) the process by which an individual seeks to achieve recognition in the identity to which they aspire.

It will be argued that what is *socially consequential* in respect of issues of identity, and therefore of interpretation or construal of activity as performance of-a-kind, arises from the interaction between the individual's *claim* on an identity and the *ascription* by others. To distinguish this understanding of identity from that *either* of identity as self-concept (personal identity) *or* of social ascription (social identity), the term '*emergent identity*' will be adopted. Such emergent identity may be examined from the individual's stance as the *claim* that an individual seeks to make on a socially understandable identity, or as the *resistance to ascription* (or *disclaim)* of such an identity by others. Emergent identity may also be examined in terms of the ascription by others, which, in relation to the individual's claim, may be considered broadly as *affirmation* or *disaffirmation*.

The processes by which claims and disclaims, and affirmations and disaffirmations are developed over time will be examined, drawing upon Harré's concept of *identity projects* (Harré, 1983). It will be argued that the interaction between claim/ disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation may be understood in terms of the notions of *warranting* (Toulmin, 1958; Draper, 1988; Gergen, 1989) and *accounts* (Scott and Lyman, 1968). From such analysis, it will be argued that the processes by which persons enter and progress within the occupational settings for which higher-level learning and skill are deemed significant should be viewed as identity projects. The *vocabulary* of learning and skill (competence, capability and so on) may thus be understood in terms of its deployment in warranting the claim on an identity by an individual, and of the affirmation (or disaffirmation) of such a claim (ie ascription of identity) by significant others.

9.2 Identity and Identifications

As noted, the notion of who-a-person-is has significance in the way that what that person is doing in a particular situation is interpreted and construed; however, the notion is highly problematic. In mundane conversation, if posed as a question, whether directed at the person ('who are you?') or to another ('who is he/ he?') may be answered in various ways[1]. A simple type of answer is that of giving the person's name, seemingly providing a unique identifier. Yet, as Harré (1998) points out, often the giving and changing of proper names is of social importance, which may vary widely in different cultures[2]. Moreover, the different forms in which a name is used (eg James Edward Smith, James Smith, James, Mr Smith, Mr J Smith, Jim Smith, Jim) may vary from situation to situation, along with nicknames ('Big Jim', 'Smithie'), remind us that even the use of a name to indicate who-a-person-is has situational significance.

The situational nature of who-a-person-is has been addressed by various writers and in various sociological and social psychological literatures. Weigert et al (1986) present what they view as a map of the 'main lines of emergence' of the notion of identity in sociological social psychology, with the key originating sources as Marx, Durkheim, Freud and Mead[3]; from this they discern five 'partially independent' lines

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1 A separate question is, of course, that which may be posed of an individual about themself: 'Who am I?', which formed the basis of the Twenty Statements Test (TST) used as the main methodological tool of the more structuralist Iowan school of symbolic interactionism (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954)

2 Harré refers to the case of a Land Dayak village where adults take a name derived from the personal name of the youngest child, something like 'Father of X' and 'Grandmother of Y', and so on (Harré, 1998: 65)

3 Weigert et al (1986) exhibit an Americo-centric orientation in respect not only of the various writers and perspectives, but also in labelling the decades ('Eisenhower Year', 'Civil Rights, Free Speech, Vietnam Years', 'Inflation, Watergate').

of emergence. Weigert et al. then contend, from their review of the development of these lines of emergence, a dual convergence of theoretical perspectives on identity as a fully accepted technical term within sociological psychology. First,

> "At the micro, interactional level, identity is seen as multiple categorizations of the individual by both self and others that vary by situation, influence behaviour, and constitute life's meanings."
> (Weigert et al, 1986: 27)

This perspective has, they argue, two distinct methodological traditions, one emphasising a qualitative, interpretationist approach (participation and observation), the other taking a quantitative, causal approach (questionnaires, experiments, measurement). The second convergence of theoretical perspectives is the macro, systemic level:

> "Identity is conceptualized as a systemic problematic that must be reasonably resolved for a healthy social order. Identity is a positional definition of actors within institutions and societies."
> (ibid.)

Identity, for the authors, is viewed as a useful bridging concept for analysis which can cut across these levels, despite such divergence of theories.

It was noted in the previous chapter that early symbolic interactionism used the notions of 'self' and 'role', drawing particularly upon the work of Mead and on American Pragmatism. Strauss explains in the introduction to the re-publication of his book, *Mirrors and Masks* (1997), originally published in 1959, that during the 1940s and 1950s the interactionist perspective was overshadowed by functionalist sociology with its emphasis upon survey methodology. He wrote that book, in stages during the 1950s, as part of his reaction to that development, seeking to fuse the social psychological aspects of interactionism with social organisation theory. In the preface to the main text he states that, whilst being an elusive concept, identity is connected with "the fateful appraisals made of oneself - by oneself and by others".

> "Everyone presents himself to the others and to himself, and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgements. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgements. The others present themselves too; they wear their own brand of mask and they get appraised in turn."
> (Strauss, 1997: 11)

Strauss develops his analysis of identity in terms of the appraisals made in the course of interaction, particularly in interpretation of a person's actions in respect of the avowal and attribution of motives[4], and in terms of transformations and change. Throughout this analysis, identity is argued to be emergent in the interactional and interpretative processes of social life.

In his recent study of the concept of identity, in sociological and social anthropological approaches, Jenkins (1996) develops a basic model which he uses to develop his analysis and argument. Drawing upon a range of perspectives which include those examined in this thesis, he states that, from such perspectives

> "an understanding emerges of the 'self' as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others. This offers a template ... of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* as the process whereby all identities - individual and collective - are constituted."
> (Jenkins, 1996: 20)

To reinforce this he states that what people think about us is no less important than what we think about ourselves:

> "It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings."
> (op. cit: 21)

To summarise from such perspectives we may say that identity is not an essence, some fixed attribute or set of attributes of a person, but is emergent in the

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4 Strauss makes clear that he uses the notion of 'motives' *not* as some internal cause of action, but in the sense used by Mills (1940), ie as vocabularies for avowal and justification of action

processes of identification(s)[5], the interactional and interpretative processes of social life. In different situations, different forms of identifications take place relevant to the particular situation; that is, persons have different identities for different arenas of the social world. We might therefore use the term '*emergent identity*' to indicate that a person's identity arises in interactional processes, such that what is socially consequential in relation to identifications emerges from both the person's expressed self-identifications and the identifications by others.

9.3 Identity projects

The processual nature of identity formation may also be seen in terms of *identity projects* (Harré, 1983). Harré sees identity formation as involving a person in the *active* development of *both* social *and* personal identity; the former is the achievement of some honoured place within the social order, whilst the latter provides a sense of biographical uniqueness. Harré develops his approach on the basis of a rejection of the Cartesian polarisation of psychological concepts on a single dimension, with the inner/ subjective/ mental at one end and the outer/ objective/ behavioural at the other. He seeks to map the conceptual space for personal psychology through a multi-dimensional model, the basic elements of which are two dimensions: the mode of 'display' and the mode of 'realization'. Psychological attributes may be *displayed* publicly, where others may observe, or privately, ie with only oneself as the audience. They may be *realized* as the property of individuals, or of collectives; that is the *right to judge* might reside in the individual or in some social collective.

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5 Or, perhaps we may say, 'identifyings' to emphasise the continuous 'doing' of identification.

This 'map' is used by Harré to formulate four phases of development in identity projects, as transition is made from one quadrant to the next (figure 9.2). The first phase, the transition from quadrant 1 to 2, he calls '*appropriation*'. This involves processes by which 'theories' are adopted from the public-collective sphere and incorporated in the private realm of thought. This is then followed by the phase of '*transformation*' (quadrant 2 to 3), whereby individuals take over their social appropriations, transforming these in terms of their own experience. Such transformations are then brought into the public arena (quadrant 3 to 4), '*publication*'. In this phase the individual is subject to the assessment of others, a hazardous process (Goffman, 1959b) which may result in confirmation of identity or stigmatisation. Finally, the phase of '*conventionalisation*' (quadrants 4 to 1) takes place whereby the individual's personal biography is taken as an accepted part of the social order.

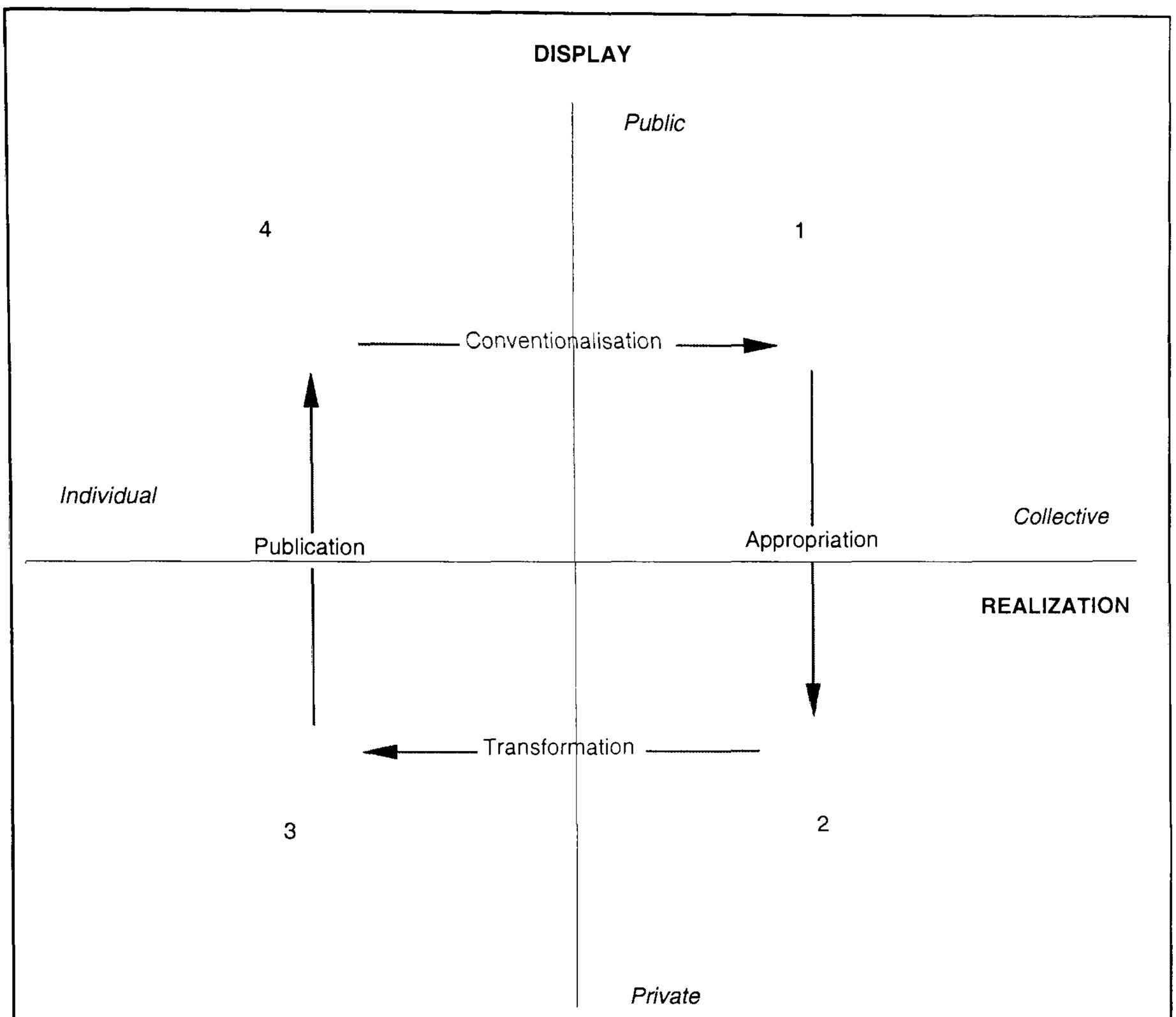

Figure 9.1 Harré's Identity Project Model (based on Harré, 1983)

This presentation of identity project in terms of (analytically) separate phases helps in the understanding of identity formation in a number of ways. Rather than focussing on the synchronous negotiation of identity in encounters, as can be the tendency of interactionist presentations, Harré's model draws attention to the diachronicity of identity formation, ie as emergent *over time*. This would seem to be a useful sensitising concept for examining how individuals move through higher education into their early employment after graduation, and how novice managers gain entry to and progression within their early managerial careers. It allows for an understanding of how, although in principle a person's situated identity may be subject to contestation in any situation, in much of social life a person's identity with regard to the situation is taken for granted, or, we might say, 'stabilised'.

As a theoretical framework, the model cannot address a number of important questions which must rely on empirical investigation. For example, why does an individual *begin* the process? What are the antecedents? And why is the *particular* identity project pursued? Along with these questions, we might ask why some individuals choose *not* to pursue a particular identity project. Such questions would raise issues about the *prior* identities of those who choose to become managers, as well as those aspects of the social context which present *choice* over identity and valuation of different possible identities. The existence of prior occupational identities gives rise the different possible relationships between those and the identity project chosen, eg of compatibility (both prior and new identities co-exist), replacement (of prior by new), transformation (prior identity is changed), or alternation (incompatibility but co-existing, where different social arenas allow for other identity to be 'masked').

Whilst such questions would rely on empirical investigation, there remain some difficulties with the model as presented. It provides for just one exit point, where 'publication' takes the form of hazard (from Goffman, 1959b), resulting in affirmation of the social identity or disconfirmation ('spoiled identity'). Yet there appear no a priori reasons for believing that, once embarked on the identity project, the individual will always pursue it to this point. The stages of the project provide for situations in which the project might be aborted, with different possible outcomes in respect of how the individual manages exit. Moreover, the final stage, conventionalisation, may be less-than-final. As a social identity project, there may be disruptions to the socially accepted characteristics of that identity; as a personal identity project, similarly there may disruptions, particularly as other identities may come into conflict with it. Finally, the model is unilinear, with the process moving inexorably onward. Analytically, this would seem to be unwarranted, as we might anticipate, or at least allow for the possibility, that there would be considerable iteration in the process, recycling the transition between stages.

To address these concerns, the next section will present a mode of relating the social and the personal, the external and internal, to develop a framework of 'identity trajectories'.

9.4 Identity Trajectories

Taking the initial point as the individual, we may say that they *lay claim to* an identity; others who are significant in the situation may be taken to *ascribe* an identity to the individual. Such claim and identity ascription are subject to negotiation, with the possibility that there is a high degree of agreement, where we may say that the identity claim is *affirmed*. Alternatively, the claim and ascription may differ

significantly, where we may say that the claim is *disaffirmed.* Taking the issues from the perspective of the others, the ascription may be *resisted* by the person, such that the identity is *disclaimed.* From these possibilities of claim or disclaim, and affirmation or disaffirmation, we may consider four broad ways of locating a person's emergent identity (figure 9.2).

Of course, this simple binary distinction between claim and disclaim, and affirmation and disaffirmation, does not take account of the possibility, perhaps likelihood, that claims may be *tentatively* presented, ascriptions *tentatively* made and *tentatively* resisted. The model in figure 9.2 should therefore be taken as having heuristic value for the particular purposes here, and would not be significantly enhanced in that respect by creating a *large* number of cells to represent different degrees of 'tentativeness' with which claim/ disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation may be made. As will be discussed shortly, one modification that is worth making to the model is to allow for a zone in the centre of the model, overlapping the four cells, to take account of the notion of tentativeness in respect of the issues with which we are here concerned (figure 9.3).

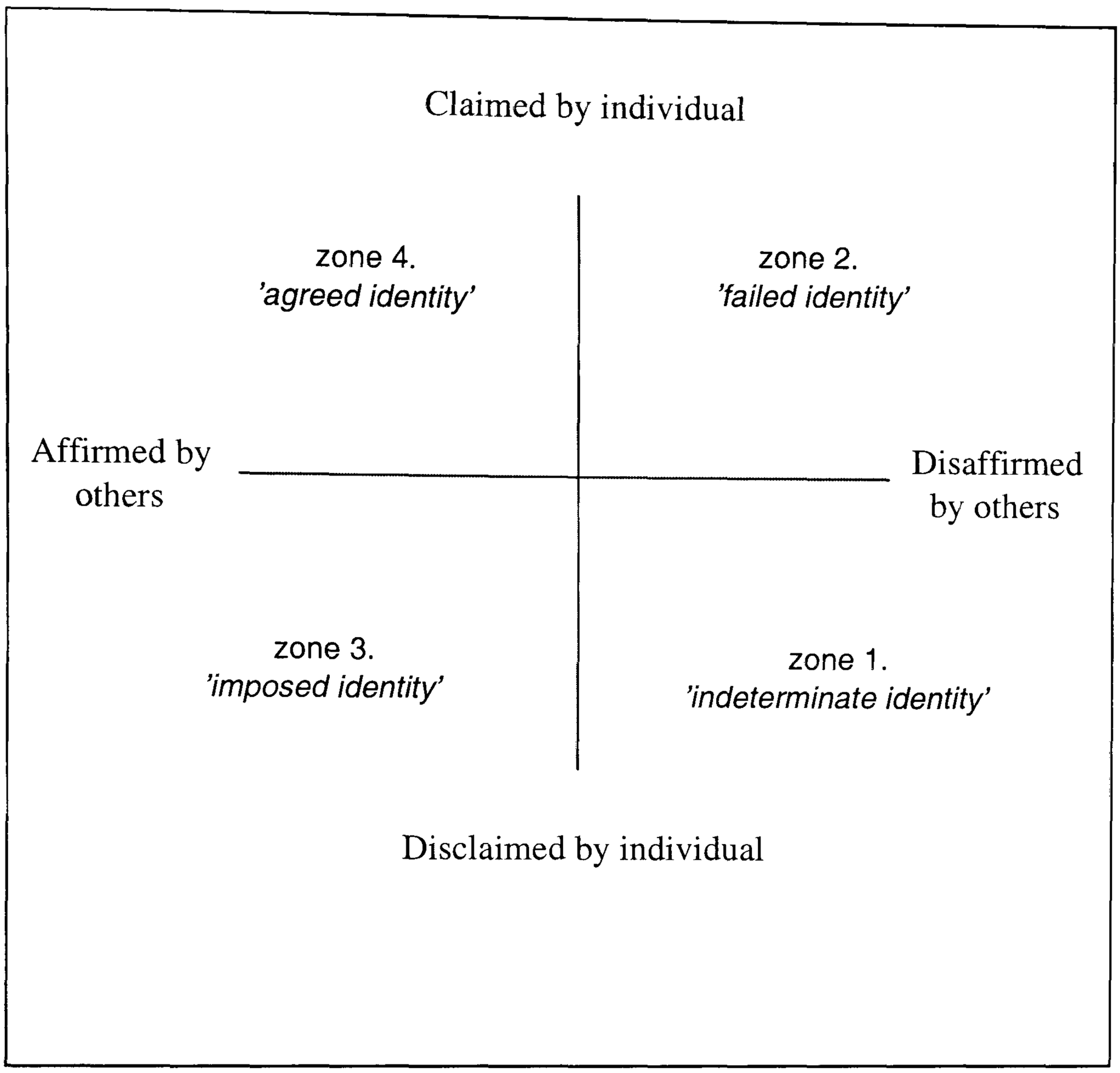

Figure 9.2 Claim-Affirmation Model of Emergent Identity

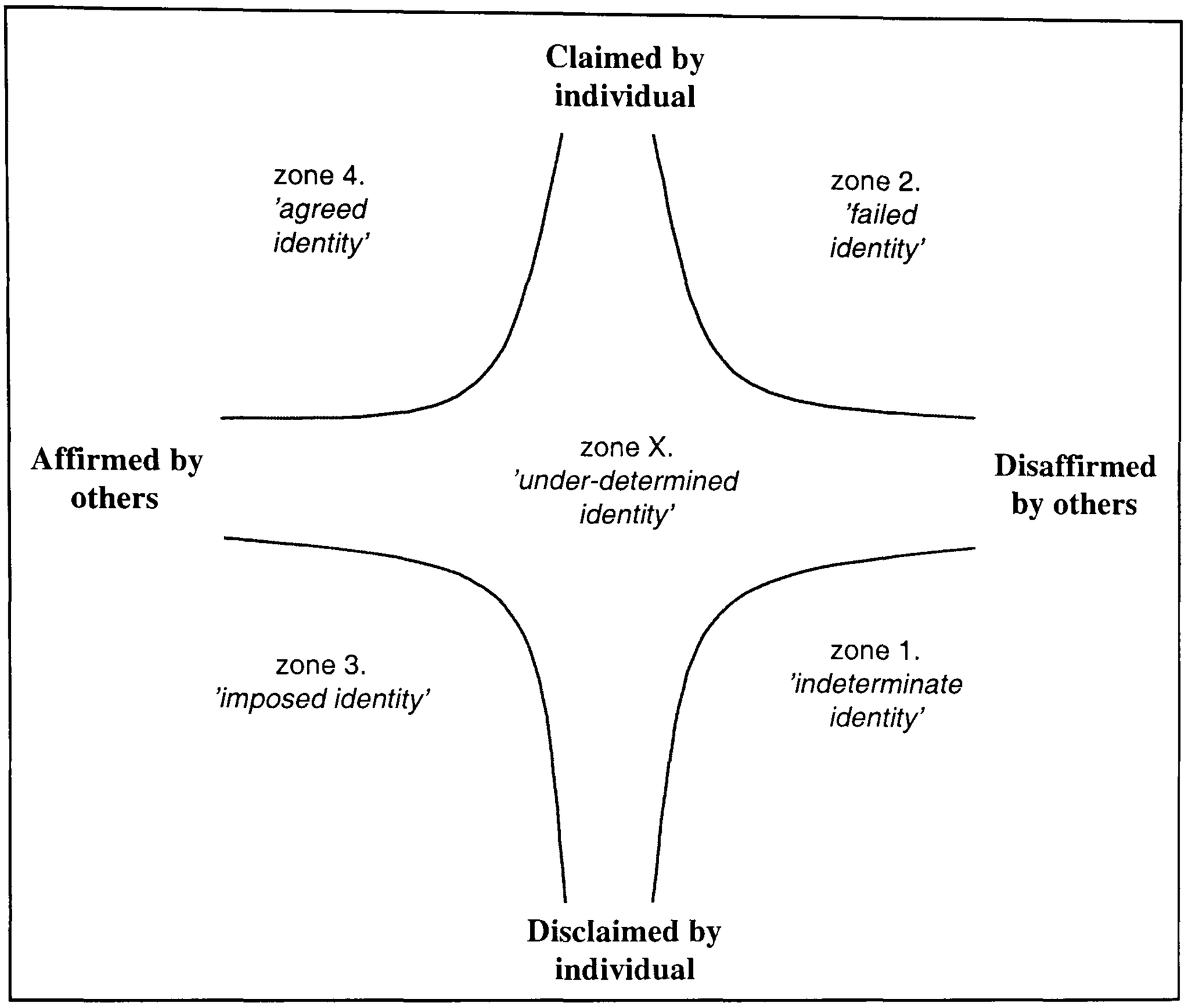

Figure 9.3 Revised Claim-Affirmation Model of Emergent Identity

The revised model shown in figure 9.3 now enables us to consider the process by which a person 'acquires' or 'achieves' an identity, that is, how they become a kind-of-person. The starting position is that of '*indeterminate identity*', such that they neither claim nor are ascribed the identity in question (zone 1). The person will then lay claim to the desired identity, and hopefully have such claim affirmed, locating their emergent identity in zone 4 in the model, as '*achieved identity*'. To reach such an outcome, the person's claim and/or the ascription by others may go through a 'tentative phase', locating this in the central 'zone X'[6] as '*under-determined identity*'. A 'happy' trajectory is thus one in which a person's identity moves from being 'indeterminate', through 'under-determined' to 'achieved'.

However, as the model indicates, there are three other possible identity outcomes, or '*modalities of emergent identity*'. Zone 2 shows the situation where the person lays a claim on an identity but this is disaffirmed, which we may term '*failed identity*' in that the person has failed to accomplish what they sought[7]. Alternatively, a person may have ascribed to them an identity which they themself resist (zone 3), which we may label as '*imposed identity*'. Finally, the person may withdraw their claim, without a clear affirmation or disaffirmation, thus returning to the position indicated at zone 1.

From this analysis we can also consider the variety of trajectories within

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6 The use of 'X' to label this central zone seems fitting for many reasons: using a letter separates it from the other zones for which numbers are used; 'X' symbolises a crossing point with four possible directions, as is the case for emergent identity; 'X' suggests the unknown or enigmatic; 'X' is the conventional symbol of 'placing one's mark' by someone who cannot write their name (a key marker of personal identity).

7 This may be related to Goffman's note that, in the 'moral career' of the mental patient, moving up the ward system (towards eventual discharge) the person is faced with increasing risk of 'his claim to be a human being' being discredited (Goffman, 1959b).

identity projects. The 'happy' trajectory, as indicated above, moves through the zones as 1-X-4, whereas the other simple trajectories are 1-X-1, 1-X-2 and 1-X-3. A more complex trajectory which ends with zone 4 may include a period of disaffirmation, eg 1-X-2-X-4. A person may tentatively claim an identity, but withdraw then try again, possibly gaining affirmation, 1-X-1-X-4. Such considerations will be utilised in the next chapter where the interviews with novice managers and graduate entering employment will be considered in terms of identity trajectories[8].

9.5 Warranting and Accounts

As emergent identity arises in the interaction between individual claims and social ascriptions there is the ever-present likelihood that there will be contestation between these. The question that arises is, then, that of how any *stability* of identity is achieved. How can and does an individual manage to present the claim on an identity so that its affirmation is gained? How can and do significant others seek to ascribe an identity to an individual, so that it is accepted by that individual, ie in effect they may be regarded as also claiming the identity? This may be considered in terms of the notions of warranting, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Focussing here specifically upon occupational identity, it is clear that one major form of such warranting is that of the education and training received by the person, especially where this is certified through qualifications awarded by assessment. Typically, a job application form and conventional presentations of

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[8] We might also note in passing that such consideration of identity trajectories may be related to the analysis by Murray (1989) of identity construction in terms of the classical narrative structures of romance and comedy (and, we may add, tragedy). Also, the notions of a 'transition curve' (Adams, et al, 1976; Parker and Lewis, 1981) and 'transition cycle' (Nicholson and West, 1988) might be considered in terms of identity trajectories.

curriculum vitae place such information near the beginning, after basic biographical information (name, address, date of birth, gender). In certain cases, the possession of a particular qualification is a pre-requisite, possibly constituting a 'licence to practice' because of certain legal or institutional requirements[9].

However, in many cases there may be no such requirement; there may also be a variety of qualifications and routes for obtaining them, and so the job applicant would need to seek to warrant their particular qualification. In addition, other forms of warranting may be possible, particular previous experience and achievements. Moreover, because, as argued previously, emergent identity is always subject to possible contestation, success in gaining entry to a job may be insufficient for an individual to reach an *achieved identity* that will remain stable. Probationary periods, formal or informal[10], and other developments provide for reassessment (*re-warranting*). Initial appointment to a post may thus be regarded as merely locating the individual into the zone of *under-determined identity* (zone X) in the model in figure 9.3. For that reason, a novice manager must continue to engage in the identity project of becoming a manager, and a graduate recruit must continue to seek to warrant their claim on their identity *as* a graduate employee. We should also note that *progression*[11]

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9 In this respect we may note the current development of the Institute for Learning and Teaching, membership of which, some protagonists appear to desire, may become a requirement for new teachers in higher education in order to continue after a probationary period.

10 Employment legislation providing the jobholder to seek redress if dismissed usually takes effect only after a certain period of time in post. Significantly, in the legislation of UK and other countries, exception is made to this where dismissal is shown to have been based on certain identifications, particularly in respect of gender, ethnicity, disability or membership of a trade union.

11 'Progression' may take a variety of forms. *Promotion* within the same occupational setting (ie with the same work organisation) is an obvious example, but progression may also involve a lateral move within the organisation, or a move to another organisation at a similar or higher status.

within an occupation both involves the warranting of identity claim and ascription and provides for the honouring of previous warranting; in terms of the latter, progression acts to *stabilise* emergent identity.

Such negotiations constitute 'hazards' (Goffman, 1959a) in respect of emergent identity, for the claim made on an identity may be disaffirmed by those who are 'significant others' in the context. How may an individual seek to repair, or even forestall, such disaffirmation? Here we may use the notion of 'accounts' as developed by Scott and Lyman (1968), in respect of dealing with breaches in the social world and restoring 'equilibrium', as a special case of warranting. They use the term 'account' to refer to "a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry"[12]. Accounts are, they argue, "standardized within cultures", so that certain accounts are "terminologically stabilized" and routinely expected when activity does meet with expectations.

> "By an account, then, we mean a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour - whether that behaviour is his own or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from the actor himself or from someone else."
> (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 46)

They draw upon Austin's (1961) discussion of *excuses and justifications*, either or both of which are likely to be invoked when, as Austin puts it

> "someone is accused of having done something, or (if that will keep it any cleaner) where someone is *said* to have done something which is bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways untoward."
> (Austin, 1961: 124)

Justifications are accounts in which responsibility for an action is admitted, but the pejorative valuation is denied; excuses are accounts in which the pejorative valuation

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12 To refer to accounts *solely* as 'linguistic devices' is somewhat limiting. We might instead say 'discursive devices', allowing for extra-linguistic forms of communication.

is admitted, but full responsibility is denied. Scott and Lyman develop an analysis of the types of justifications and excuses, but these are not of primary concern. What is of interest in the Scott and Lyman argument is the link between accounts and identity.

After elaborating on the different types of accounts, Scott and Lyman discuss strategies for *avoiding* accounts. They state that the vulnerability of actors to questions about their conduct will vary with the situation and the status of the actors. In particular,

> "Where hierarchies of authority govern the social situation, the institutionalized office may eliminate the necessity of an account, or even prevent the question from arising."
> (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 57)

Accounts presuppose an identifiable speaker and an audience:

> "The particular identities of the interactants must often be established as part of the encounter in which the account is presented ... To assume an identity is to don the mantle appropriate to the account to be offered."
> (op. cit.: 58)

Such identities are negotiated as part of the encounter, such that, according to Scott and Lyman,

> "*Every account is a manifestation of the underlying negotiation of identities.*"
> (op.cit.: 59; emphasis in original)

9.6 Conclusion

The analysis in the previous chapter led to the conclusion that, for the interpretation of activity in situations where there is a low degree of specifiability of performance as instantiation of practices, the identity of the actor was of particular significance. This chapter has explored the notion of identity in non-essentialist terms, as processual, involving identity projects. This involves a 'dialectic of internal-external identification' (Jenkins, 1996), the interplay between what has been termed here the claim or disclaim on identity by the person, and the ascriptions (affirmation

or disaffirmation) by others. Such interplay gives rise to what has been termed '*emergent identity*'; a framework of possible modalities of emergent identity was presented as a heuristic device for analysing the identity trajectories which individual may take. Identity claims (and disclaims) and ascriptions (ie affirmation or disaffirmation of claim) were considered in terms of *warranting*.

The notion of identity warranting thus appears to provide a useful concept for understanding how higher level education and training relates to the processes of entry to and progression within occupational arenas. Such understanding was considered briefly in analytical terms, but for it to have theoretical utility it would be necessary to deploy the concept in empirical settings. The next chapter seeks to do this, by examination of the interview transcripts of various individuals who are, or may termed, 'novice managers' and recent graduates seeking and gaining employment.

Chapter 10

Identity Trajectories, Identity Warrants:

Managers and Graduates

10.1 Introduction

To review the argument so far, we noted through the analysis in chapters 5 and 6 that the conventional model of learning and competence, underpinning the learning and competence agenda in higher education and in management education, training and development, was not sustainable on the basis of the evidence available. In chapter 7, the systematic ambiguity of the concepts of learning and competence (and competency, skill, etc) was examined, and the analysis of those concepts led us to the conclusion that expressions using such terms must be understood in terms of 'verdictives' (Austin, 1962), based on 'semi-hypotheticals' (Ryle, 1949) relating to anticipation of future performance. Further analysis of the nature of the social character of human behaviour, in chapters 8, showed that judgements of performance implicate notions of the social practices and the identities deemed appropriate to the situation in which a person's activity is interpreted or construed as performance-of-a-kind. In the case of performance in 'higher-level' occupations, the low degree of specifiability of the relevant practices places a higher degree of significance on the identity of the person whose performance is in question. The attribution of learning and competence in respect of entry into higher-level occupations (graduate jobs and managerial positions) may thus be seen as modes of warranting such entry primarily on the basis of identity.

In chapter 9, the concept of identity was developed and explored

from which it was argued that this was best understood as *processual* and *emergent.* A model was developed of *emergent identity*, arising through the interplay between the individual's *claim* on or *disclaim* of an identity, and the identity *ascriptions* (as *affirmation* or *disaffirmation*) by significant others. The model displayed five broad 'zones' within which a person's situated emergent identity may be located at any moment, and through which their *identity trajectory* may analysed. The expression of identity claims and disclaims, and identity affirmation and disaffirmation was considered in terms of the concept of *warrants* which, it was argued, was more useful than the concept of accounts. From this analysis, it was argued that it was possible to gain theoretical understanding *and* undertake empirical investigation into the processes by which individuals gain entry into and progression within occupational settings for which *judgements* regarding higher-level skill and learning are deemed as significant.

In this chapter, the utility of this analysis for such empirical investigation will considered. Transcript material from interviews conducted with 'novice managers' and recent graduates, as they enter and progress within occupational settings, will be examined. The interview material was used in chapter 5 to provide a critique of the conventional model of learning and competence as represented by the Management Charter Initiative's approach to managerial competence, and the key skills agenda in higher education. The material will be reworked in this chapter to demonstrate and illustrate the application of an *'emergent identity' approach.* Similarly, the transcripts of interviews with relatively new graduates, considered as part of the analysis chapter 5, will be examined in terms of the issues of a specific emergent identity, ie what we might term the '*graduate identity*'.

This chapter will thus seek to demonstrate that alternative perspective presented in the previous chapters may form the basis of empirical investigation and analysis. The theoretical analysis places emphasis upon issues of identity, particularly in respect of the trajectories through different modalities of emergent identity, and in terms of the modes by which individual may warrant their claims on an desired identity and by which significant others may warrant their affirmation or disaffirmation of such claims. This chapter will seek to demonstrate that these issues may be subject to empirical investigation and analysis, and thus enable us to gain an better understanding of the processes by which individuals gain entry into managerial occupations and graduate employment.

Transcript material from the interviews conducted with 'novice managers' and recent graduates, as they enter and progress within occupational settings, will be examined. The interview material was used in chapter 5 to provide a critique of the conventional model of learning and competence as represented by the Management Charter Initiative's approach to managerial competence, and the key skills agenda in higher education.

10.2 Identity Trajectories

In chapter 5, we considered the experiences of a number managers and graduates, presenting these in the form of case study narratives derived from transcribed interviews. These were used to argue that the complexity of their lives, particularly with regard to employment, undermined the adequacy claims of the conventional model of learning and competence. In this section, we shall use the claim-affirmation model of emergent identity, represented in figure 9.3 in the previous

chapter, to consider the trajectories of those managers and graduates. A further two case studies will be presented.

Case study 1: 'Making something of my life'

This graduate experienced disaffirmation of his identity as a graduate 'worthy of employment' (zone 2). For a time, he may be seen to have withdrawn his claim on that identity (zone 1), prioritising another identity, that of his family and ethnic identity, by travelling to and staying with relatives in Pakistan. Determined to 'make something' of his life, he re-established his identity claim, gaining tentative affirmation (zone X) by gaining entry to a short course for unemployed graduates. He eventually gained employment, not specifically in post advertised as a graduate entry job, but working with other employees all of whom are graduates (zone 4).

The trajectory may be shown as

1-X-2-X-1-X-X-4

Case study 2: Graduate SB: Leaving a traditional 'graduate job'

For this person, the move from an identity as a student, and thus *potential* graduate employee (claim and tentative affirmation) was quickly made, with a job offer before graduation, then to affirmation on starting the job (zone 1 through X to 4). However, she soon began to question (tentative disclaim, from zone 4 to X) the identity she then had, which was not matching her aspirations and claim on an identity as a personnel management practitioner. She effected her disclaim by resigning (from X to 3), to seek a post which was closer to her aspirations, and quickly gained one (from 3 through X to 4). This identity is further affirmed by her success in her new post, and by the interaction she has with her boss. However, this is not fully in line

with her aspiration and is seeking to warrant a claim on an identity as a personnel management practitioner (from 4 to X).

The trajectory may thus be represented as:

1-X-4-X-3-X-4-X.

Case Study 3: Graduate SC: From secretary to project manager

This graduate changed her ideas about what career she wished to enter, and was initially employed in a non-graduate job, as a secretary (zone 2). She soon began to challenge the type of work she was expected to do (zone X), seeking to assert her claim to be able to do work that was being undertaken by others who were in graduate posts. This led to her being given such work, dropping the secretarial tasks that were originally part of her job, resulting in her identity claim being affirmed.

The trajectory may thus be represented as:

1-X-2-X-4

Case study 4: Manager MG: From uncertain student to young manager

After going directly into employment following A levels, this person saw her career prospects being limited (because of her gender identity). She studied for a degree, and was recruited as a management trainee on graduation. She now holds a job with 'manager' in its title, although she does not directly manage staff. This latter point will be taken up in section 10.3, in respect of warranting the claim on the managerial identity.

This management identity trajectory may be represented as:

1-X-2-X-1-X-4

Case study 5: BF: Teacher or manager?

This teacher initially regarded management as *not* an identity which he valued

and sought. As director of studies for art in a secondary school, his views have somewhat altered, although he still questions whether he is indeed a manager.

The trajectory may be shown as:

1-X-2-X

A further two case studies will now be presented and discussed.

Case Study 6: NE - novice manager, undertaking management studies course at university

NE was born and went to school in Ireland, leaving school with the Irish school leaving certificate (usually classed as between GCSE and GCE 'A' level). He worked in administration for the civil service, before leaving at the age of 25 to come to England. After being made redundant in a former job, he now has a job with the title 'office co-ordinator', working for a security firm. He has a staff of seven, and has responsibility for the payroll system and other administration. His first appointment was as a supervisor (of three staff), and was promoted to his present post after some restructuring and redundancies. The move into this new post was not easy, especially the first month, as he realised that he now carried responsibility for the area, that he is the one with whom 'the buck stops'. He felt that some former colleagues were unwilling to accept him in his new role, and so he had to impose discipline. In the case of one person, who apparently had expected to be offered the job, and was causing problems, he had to ask his line manager to intervene. He also found difficulty with other senior managers, especially in terms of their styles of working, most having a military background; he began to develop more assertiveness with them to 'stand his ground'.

He had already started on part-time studies for a Higher National

Certificate in Business and Finance when he started with his present employer. On completion of this, he went on to the Diploma in Management Studies, because it seemed to relevant to his role as a manager. He also did not wish to take the time needed to carry on to a part-time degree course before taking postgraduate study. He was conscious of time moving on, as his girlfriend has a PhD; she, a fellow manager and the two people with whom he lives are all younger. He felt that he was getting left behind, "falling off the train".

His plans are to return to Ireland, and feels that this would be more difficult to do after the age of 35. He has ideas for setting up a restaurant business, but in the meantime sees himself as likely to take a senior managerial post, probably with a security firm. He wants to return to Ireland in a position he would not otherwise have gained, because of the qualifications and experience he has gained in the UK.

Discussion:

In terms of occupational identity, NE may be seen as initially gaining affirmation of a claim on the identity as an administrator within the civil service in Ireland, warranted by the qualifications gained through his education (in terms of figure 9.4 moving from zone 1 through X to 4). Experience in administration provided the warrant for gaining affirmation as an employee and as an administrator, in his first job after migrating to the UK (moving from zone X to zone 4). His identity as an employee of that organisation was disaffirmed when he was made redundant (from 4 through X to 1)[1]. He was then able to gain affirmation of a claim on an identity as a

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[1] Redundancy and other modes of dismissal might be regarded as involving a trajectory from 4 to 1, rather than through zone X. However, presumably there is always the *possibility* that even after the issue of *notice* of redundancy, an employee may be kept in employment.

supervisor, with the supporting affirmation of such a claim by an employment agency[2] (from 1 through X to 4) . The identity as supervisor was further affirmed by promotion to a management, ironically as a consequence of the identity disaffirmation of the previous incumbent. However, his identity as a manager was subject to contestation, and thus *attempted disaffirmation*, by some of his subordinates (from zone 4 to X, with the potential to move to zone 2). He took steps to reinforce his claim on the managerial identity by seeking and gaining the affirmation of his line manager, which constituted a strong warrant for his claim (from zone X back to 4). He is seeking further warranting of his claim on managerial identity through studying for a postgraduate/ post-experience diploma in management studies. He aspires to be (lay claim on the identity of) a senior manager.

In terms of the 'zones' of emergent identity, the trajectory may be shown as:

1-X-4-X-4-X-1-X-4-X-4.

As with case study 1, we should also note that other situated identities, and their claim and affirmation, are at work. His anticipated return to Ireland is based on the desire to claim a 'superior' identity to that which he would have been able to claim and have affirmed without having the warranting available through experience and qualifications gained in the UK. His relationship to his girlfriend carries with it differentials in educational identity, and his identity in relation to those with whom he share accommodation carried issues in respect of age, 'falling of the train' as he puts it. Age is also a factor with respect to his identity in relation to other managers in his company, most being ver much older but one being younger.

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2 We may also note that the person(s) in the employment agency would also be engaging in an identity project, in terms of gaining and retaining affirmation by client employers and candidates that they were worthy of their services being used (and paid for).

Case Study 2: NJ - novice manager, graduate currently taking management studies course

NJ is currently senior support worker for an organisation providing housing for people with learning difficulties and other health problems. She describes it as the "lowest realm of the management ladder". After gaining a degree in psychology in Ireland, she came to the UK to take a course in journalism. However, she decided that she did not really want to be in journalism, and wanted to return to what she was really interested in, ie psychology. In particular she wished to work in an area dealing with people with mental health problems, espceially those with challenging behaviour. She worked for a year with a National Health Service (NHS) Trust, but disliked the large institution approach; she found she was working with staff who were much older than her, under very strict management, and she did not like the way 'they did things'. With the changes to form of care, large institutions were closing, and her current organisation was one which was taking over the provision of housing and care for clients. She did have the opportunity to continue working for the NHS Trust, but she did not have training and a background in nursing, and so would have not prospect of moving into management with the Trust.

As a senior support worker she organises the work of a team of six support workers (three per shift), who carry out the various duties in the home. Her work also involves planning care and liaising with social services department, doctors, psychiatrists. This work is shared with another senior support worker, and both work for a house manager in whose they deputise for on a shift basis. She enjoys working in what she sees as an 'exciting

development', within a home environment rather than a large institution; she also likes the fact that she is working with people who are mostly of a similar age, unlike the situation in the NHS Trust.

The previous manager was dismissed, and she makes very critical statements about his incompetence. Many of the residents in the home have challenging behaviour, and some are psychotic; if a resident were to attack a worker, there would be no support from the manager. So the staff did not respect the manager's decisions, but would ask NJ or the other senior support worker for decisions about what action to take when a client was causing problems.

She has been acting house manager until the replacement arrived, whom she has been helping to settle in. She experienced some aspects of the challenges facing management early into her current post, when she took a decision, on a security matter, involving relatively high expenditure within a budget area. The area manager reprimanded her for this, which she considered to be 'over the top', but it made her aware of budgetary constraints; this had not been an important issue in her job with the NHS Trust.

She believes that she is ready to be a house manager, but no vacancies currently exist in the company; she considers that she has been "more or less promised" a house manager post in a few months time, with company expansion. Currently she is taking the Diploma in Management Studies because she wanted to do further, postgraduate study and to enhance her management career prospects. She emphasises the importance of being able to perform effectively as a manager, not merely having qualifications.

Discussion:

NJ starts, for the purpose of this analysis, with the aspiration for an identity within the occupational field of journalism. To do this she takes a course in journalism, warranted by her degree (zone 1 to X). However, she then decides she does not, after all wish to have an identity in journalism (zone X to 1), using her degree in psychology to warrant a move into work with people with learning difficulties, applying and gaining a post in an NHS trust (zone 1 through X to 4). Her experience leads her to conclude that she does not wish to have the identity as a care worker in a large institutional setting, as this identity is displayed by others who are older, and more established in that identity (zone 4 to X). She gains a job in a smaller residential home, warranting her identity on her qualifications and experience, and finds the post more in keeping with her values (zone X to 4). Her identity as a care worker is affirmed further when she is appointed as acting manager (zone X *as* manager), after the previous manager was dismissed (for that manager, shift from zone 4 to 2, 'failed identity'). She experiences some difficulty which tentatively disaffirms her identity now as a manager (potential of moving from zone X to 2), but re-affirmation takes place and she anticipates becoming a manager of a residential home soon (moving from X, acting, to 4, full manager). She is seeking to enhance her warrant for her claim on the identity as manager by undertaking a management studies course.

The identity trajectory may be represented as:

1-X-1-X-4-X-4-X

Summary:

The case studies discussed above demonstrate the way that the careers may be

examined in terms of identity trajectories, using here the claim-affirmation model. Such analysis provides the basis for empirical research, and the development of research-based policy and practice, which is concerned with the post-graduation employment trajectories of those who undertake higher education, and with the employment trajectories of individuals seeking to enter managerial positions.

10.3 Type of identity trajectories

However, the case study based analysis, in the verbal and in terms of the sequence of symbols for the zones, is still fairly basic, and might be further elaborated. One way of doing this may be to focus on the movement into and from zone X ('under-determined identity'). At stake in this zone is what zone would next be entered. The 'happy' trajectory is into zone 4, 'achieved identity', where the identity is claimed and affirmed. However, there are other possible trajectories. Thus, for NE, the contestation of his managerial identity by some members of his staff place him in zone X with the potential of moving to zone 2, ie where he would be seen as not being capable of managing his staff and would possibly be demoted or dismissed. NJ moves from zone X to zone 1 when she decided not to pursue (disclaimed) an identity in journalism, and from zone X to zone 3 when she tenders her resignation from her post with the NHS trust (still in post but disclaiming the identity). Similar potential and actual moves from the under-determined identity into one or other of the other four zones may be seen in the cases of other interviewees.

This suggests that this mode of analysis may be enhanced by developing a typology of the *different potential outcomes* from a move into zone X, where either there is tentative affirmation or disaffirmation or tentative claim or disclaim, and the

likely resolution(s)[3]. That is, given a particular *tendency* in the trajectory, for example, where someone's claim is being challenged (potential disaffirmation), which may be shown as X-2 (tending towards zone 2), we might consider three possible resolutions:

- the person's emergent identity remains in zone X;
- there is a move into zone 2;
- there is a move into zone 1.

The first possibility is where the challenge continues, but is resisted by the individual (who maintains the claim on the identity in question). The second possible resolution is where the person is seen to have failed in respect of the identity, for example, where someone is dismissed as 'incompetent'. The third case would be where the individual decides to withdraw their claim on the identity, for example by resigning.

The schematic presentation in table 10.1 displays what are the likely trajectories where there is tentative claim/ disclaim and/or affirmation/ disaffirmation. Some of these relate to the subjects of *other research*. For example, the case of the trajectory from under-determined to 'imposed identity (X-3), where this is preceded by achieved identity (4-X-3), may be related to the 'reluctant managers' studied by Scase and Goffee (1989). These are mid-career managers who realise that their aspirations on higher-level managerial posts are unlikely to achieved, and question the wisdom of the commitment and efforts they have previously devoted to their jobs and employers, at the cost in respect of other aspects of their lives, eg family life. Many continue in post, with lowered commitment and experiencing dissatisfaction and possible stress, to the disbenefit of both employer and themselves.

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3 The term 'resolution' is intended to indicate the outcome in the time period of interest and concern. There is never an ultimate resolution of the negotiated and emergent nature of identity, except where a person no longer has any social existence.

Trajectory tendency	Possible Resolution	Description/ example
X-1	X	remains in under-determined identity; situation is fraught with uncertainty
X-1	1	abandons aspiration on identity, eg resigns from post and/or employer to take a different post
X-2	X	remains in under-determined identity; is subject to continued challenge
X-2	2	is dismissed from post
X-2	1	person abandons aspiration on identity, *probably* also resigning from employer
X-3	X	remains in under-determined identity; continues to question whether s/he wishes to, and/or will be able to undertake the job
X-3	3	no longer identifies with post, but is not able to relinquish it; lower motivation, possibly engages in 'timeserving' and/or actively searches for alternative post
X-3	4	identity is achieved; person is confirmed in post
X-3	1	decides that no longer aspires to identity; resigns from post and/or employer
X-4	X	remains in under-determined identity, but has hope of achieving affirmation in near future
X-4	4	'happy' trajectory; confirmed in post

Table 10.1 Possible trajectories from 'under-determined identity'

Where the case of trajectory X-3 is preceded by zone 1, and the person remains in zone 3, we have a typical scenario described by Parker and Lewis (1981) in terms of managers in transition, at the low point of the transition curve. In contrast, the resolution of X-3 in terms of a return to zone 1 is descriptive of both career change for younger employees (as with SB), and in the case of older employees, of 'downshifters', ie those who seek a simpler lifestyle by abandoning the 'rat-race'.

Such analysis points to the importance of identity trajectories in attempts to develop approaches to the design and provision of higher education and of management and professional education and development (higher-level learning). This is shown by Parker and Lewis (1981) in their discussion, in respect of managers-in-transition, of a management development programme (at Cranfield Management School) which attempted to address the issues faced by such managers. Similarly, Walters (1979) describes an approach to supervisory development which, although expressed in terms of 'role', may be fitted to this model. The use of mentoring as an approach to the initial development of managerial and professional employees (eg Clutterbuck, 1985/ 1991; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995) may be viewed in terms of assisting such employees in and through the 'under-determined' phase of their identity trajectories. In contrast, the conventional model of learning and competence appears to have little to offer in addressing such issues, as it lacks any notion of an intermediate position between lacking competence and being competent.

10.3 Warranting claim on managerial identity

In our analysis of emergent identity in chapter 9, the notion of *warranting* was used in relation to the modes by which individuals laid *claim* on a desired identity, and the modes by which significant others *affirmed* or *disaffirmed* such claims. The

forms of warranting that are used would thus appear to be an important focus for empirical investigation and analysis in respect of the identity trajectories with which we are concerned. For this study, only the modes of warranting of identity *claim* have been studied. Taking emergent identity as a negotiated outcome, of claim and affirmation,

as discussed in chapter 9, raises two key questions which the interviews were intended to explore. First, *whether* the interviewees did, in fact, perceive themselves to be managers, ie lay claim to the identity. The selection of interviewees was made specifically on the basis that they may not be in formal managerial positions: students on a management course, graduate management trainees, and teachers in positions as departmental heads or equivalent. As discussed in chapter 4, such a research strategy differs from most studies of managers, where these were clearly in established positions, ie middle managers (eg Clements, 1958; Clark, 1966; Stewart, 1967, 1976; Pahl and Pahl, 1971; Minztberg, 1973; Poole et al, 1981; Kotter, 1982; Scase and Goffee, 1989[4]). Following on from the first question, where the response indicated that there was a claim on the identity, is the question of how the claim is warranted, ie how does the individual person seek to gain affirmation that they are indeed a manager. Whilst the interview outline schedule was designed to explore these *analytically* separate issues, the answers to both questions overlapped, in that the interviewees would elaborate on their answer to the first question, and such elaboration may be taken as expression of the warranting of their claim. This is, perhaps, to be expected in the discursive context of a research interview. The

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4 As discussed above, the 'reluctant managers' studied by Scase and Goffee may be described as on a trajectory from 'achieved identity' towards 'imposed identity', in terms of the claim-affirmation model.

following discussion will cover both issues.

The first question was posed to the interviewees in the form of a question, eg 'in what sense would you say your job is managerial?'. For all the graduate management trainees, and for many students on the management course, the answer was not straightforward, with the answer typically being expressed in terms such as 'I'm not a manager but ...'. For these, what would clearly constitute being a manager was the fact of having supervisory authority over and being responsible for the work of other staff. However, a claim on being a manager could be made in terms of other aspects of the work undertaken or circumstances in which it was undertaken; for example:

> MA: Right, well I'm managing processes rather than people, as a product manager I am sort of responsible for the pricing policy, the promotions the place, who we sell it to, and also the product specification itself. Obviously a lot of my decisions affect a lot of other people and also I have to share my decisions with other people, confer with them before actually doing anything. But it's the initiative that would come from myself.
>
> MG: I don't have a team to manage but I do have full responsibility. I mean I'm the only person working on this project so I have to manage my own time ... I have to go out to a lot of people and persuade them that the new products I am coming up with are sensible and they are what the business needs.
>
> NH: Indirectly [a managerial job], because although I am not managing staff, I am managing projects. I am budgeting schemes for the mentally ill people, so I oversee the running of various schemes. I am actually on a management committee for several different schemes ... So I do staff recruitment and am involved in all that.

The tentative nature of responses by these individuals who do not directly manage subordinate staff contrasts sharply with those of individuals who do manage staff. Here the replies were direct and straightforward; for example:

> ND : Head of buildings, plural, operations ... kind of facilities manager, if you like...My direct responsibilities are for security, cleaning, room bookings, and fabric and buildings maintenance....

Interviewer: So how many people who you call supervisors or managers do you have reporting to you?

ND: Reporting to me directly? My deputy, one, site officer, two... directly to me, three.... there's many other managers and supervisors, the site superintendents, but they go up to the sites officer and the sites officer reports directly to me...

NE : [my job title] It's actually termed as an office co-ordinator ... [which involves] first of all supervising seven people, that's administration, and that includes a payroll system for four hundred and fifty people, and that brings me into contact with security officers themselves or security guards...

Emerging from such responses appears to be that the interviewees held some basic, tacit model of what is involved in being a manager and doing managerial work. Direct authority over others ('managing people') is viewed as a *sufficient criterion* for being (having the identity of) a manager, ie warranting the claim on that identity. However, it not viewed as a *necessary criterion* for having the claim on a managerial identity. This may be tentatively asserted (warranted) when the work involves significant autonomy and significant responsibility for determining and co-ordinating projects and processes, particularly where these are of major importance to the organisation, and where this brings the individual into a (honoured) relationship with important people within and/or outside the organisation.

However, although the novice managers without responsibility for managing staff used other criteria for making a tentative claim on a managerial identity, when asked what they saw as the key aspects of being a 'good' manager they tended to refer initially to aspects of managing people.

MB : ... hmm, understanding your job, understanding the people you're working with and how you relate to each other, being sensitive to their needs, respecting them , that sort of thing...

MA : I think being able to delegate to the right people. I mean, coming back to the people management bit, you might not always have the time to listen to these issues, but you should be able to delegate the responsibility of that to someone else to ensure that, you know, the

job was done ... and to do that, I think you need to know who you're working with and also be a good communicator...

The problematic nature of the process of constructing a managerial identity may be seen to be reflected in the lack of a clearly identifiable source of specification of such an identity. Although there is a considerable volume of literature on 'how to manage', ostensibly written in popular style and widely available, most respondents did not refer to this as the origin of their own understanding of managing. Some referred to general conversation with social contacts as a key source:

Interviewer : Was there anything you did about management before taking the DMS course, or going on short courses?]

NA : No, no not really. A lot of friends I have are sort of managers, so I hear them talking about their problems all the time ...

Those who had formally studied aspects of managing within their degree courses tended to discount the study of theory in favour of contemporaneous or later practical experience:

NC : It was through actually doing it that you learned what you learned

MA : Well, at university you do learn a lot of theory about management skills ... and my view of management is you can't become a good manager just through theory...

MB : It's not a set of logical steps, it's not written down anywhere as a set of rules, you know. What I've said and a whole lot more which are all part of leadership and management, and everything else...

For most, the observation of other managers was a significant source of their developing understanding of being a manager.

NJ : You were asking what I know of management books and things. Well, I don't know anything at all, but I have always made a study of people that are in management positions, what makes them good. And I know immediately why I like someone as a manager, so I think I would be a good manager later on ...

NB : ... looking at different managers who are successful and trying to learn from them. I think that helps and then you go from one

> organisation to another and you see very different managerial styles, and it helps you to, I think, you learn....I would not necessarily copy but try to adapt ... thinking what it is that makes the person seem effective ...

This would seem to confirm the *interactional* nature of the process by which novice managers *interpret* and *give meaning to* managerial identity and the practices which constitute managing. Observation, interaction and performance appear to have primary importance in such process. Whilst this does not totally discount those approaches which attempt to *specify* and *codify* management performance, it does indicate their limited and subordinate place in how novice managers come to understand what it means to be a manager in terms which they can use to warrant their own claim on the identity. To put it in terms of the model of identity projects (Harré, 1983), as discussed in chapter 9, this may be seen as the 'appropriation' and 'transformation' phases.

Significantly, many respondents made *negative* evaluations of other (established) managers:

> NA: I do think people are rather sort of wishy-washy actually, and in the [management] meetings I attend quite often not many decisions are reached .... I think people do look for more leadership from the top.
>
> I'm surrounded by all these managers and I do watch them. And in fact quite a lot of them classed as managers don't really manage.
>
> NE: [speaking of the dominance of managers with military backgrounds] I think one of their problems is that within the military [they are not used to] being accountable really. It's a bit different to a business really. I notice that in them, and other non-ex-military people notice as well... especially the accountants feel that they're a bit too quick to snap and say 'yes I know' without looking into the context of things.
>
> NK: I am still actually considering whether I actually want to really be a manager, in the real sense ... because from what I see of managers who are, in terms of managing the whole staff team... they are not very popular... and a lot of them are actually very ineffective

Such negative comments have a character very different from mere complaint. They

may be seen as challenges to the *moral right* of such individuals with the title of 'manager', to hold that identity. This combination of positive evaluations of established managers (whom one can emulate), and of negative evaluations (whose right to be such is challenged), may be seen as the novice managers claiming to know what are the attributes of managerial identity and to have the *right to judge* others' claim on that identity.

A further development from such evaluations is where novice managers are able to compare themselves with established managers undertaking the same course.

> NC : ...on the course there are a lot of the other people who do have management responsibility and they've got such better jobs than I have, and yet I was able to work as well as them... it gave me the confidence to think 'well if they can do things as well as them, then I'd be able to be a manager too'.

> NB : I haven't been yet in a position where I've had to manage people on a large scale at all, but looking at people [on the course] that did, I certainly don't think it's going to be a problem when the situation arises.

Such evaluations of and comparisons with others who have established managerial identities might thus be taken as indicating that the novice has completed the phases of appropriation and transformation, in Harré's model of identity projects. They have achieved an understanding of the attributes of a manager, and related these to themselves and their own experiences. They too can be managers, ie are on a trajectory through under-determined identity towards achieved identity; what is then required is some response by those who are in a position to affirm the claim.

In Harré's model, this would be the next stage in developing and acquiring such an identity, ie requires 'publication', some form of public display that evokes assessment by others. This can be seen in way that many respondents talked about 'credibility', of 'pleasing' superiors, of being seen to make a difference.

> MA : I think you've got to have sort of credibility amongst the sales force,

and I felt that, perhaps, this [leading a conference session] was a good way to sort of establish myself...I just decided that myself - no-one said 'I really think you should lead the session at this conference because you can establish credibility' - I mean, my predecessor said to me before he left, he said 'you know, an important thing is to make sure you establish yourself fairly quickly ..

NA : So in a way ... actually that was a sort of managerial project because what I had to do was, with fairly limited resources, I had to find somewhere where I could set up a computer ... etc etc... I got people in to input the data within a month or so ... well quite quickly. ... so he [immediate superior] was quite pleased with that.

For ND, an 'established' manager in terms of managing staff, the first managerial post after a career in the army led to a self-estimation that he was capable of a higher position.

ND : That was cleaning manager ... I don't consider it part of my employment career because it was my first step out of the army, to get my feet, and I realised that I'd grossly undershot my mark, my target... I started looking at advertisements [for jobs] ... and I noticed one.. which was double in salary and the responsibility was far, far greater than I had at the time. So I applied for it and got it basically...

In this manager's case, the 'public display' in terms of applying for the job was followed by further public display, expressed as 'getting stuck in'.

ND : I got stuck in, and got stuck into many things,... and started putting quite a lot of things right. And my line manager at the time [...] said 'we're going to upgrade you, we're going to cange your title to "head of...", and make you a spending head because of the title'...

Here the manager has successfully achieved recognition in the identity, affirmed through the change of status accorded by others. Significantly, in terms of his own biography, he discounts the period spent as cleaning manager "as part of my employment career", although it was clearly a significant element in the 'transformation' phase, using Harré's model (Harré, 1983).

Another 'established' manager, NE (whose identity trajectory was discussed in section 10.2, case study 6) faced a challenge to his right to his job (coming in from outside the organisation) by others who 'felt they should have the job rather than me'. In this case he took the matter to his own manager, suggesting that disciplinary action

was required.

> NE : I initiated that then to the administration manager, who's over the whole department. I just explained to the admin. manager that I thought I'd tried my best and I thought the person was totally unreasonable. And suggested there were reasons for this behaviour, which I explained, which I thought was my perception of why they were behaving that way. And it came to a head, where they had to be disciplined because it was almost worse than sabotage, it that's the word...

Here we observe public display in terms of the manager's attempt to show the senior manager that he (the manager) had undertaken the actions appropriate to being a manager, and to request support ie affirmation of his identity as manager. The attempt was successful, providing such affirmation, which would then affect the social situation in which that manager functioned.

The above analysis shows the utility of the concept of warranting, in terms of developing an understanding of how novice managers present their identity claims. The number of novice managers interviewed is insufficient to construct a meaningful typology of such warrants, given the range of possible *types* of trajectories and their empirical instantiations. It is also not possible from these studies to make any conclusions on *how particular warrants* give rise to their effects in respect of the types of warrants deployed by those who may affirm or disaffirm identity claim. This would point to the need for similar research on a larger scale.

Moreover, the research methodology has provided for just a one-sided version of the process by which the novice managers sought to warrant their claims on the managerial identity. In so far as the outcomes from such warranting has been described by the interviewees, this is as interpreted by them in respect of their intentions[5]. What is not available is evidence of how other interactors understood and

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5 Or at least the discursive representation of intention in the context of interaction with the interviewer taking place at a later time.

responded to the warrants presented, nor how they *may have* understood and responded to *different* warrants, in respect of the claim on identity. This suggests the need for *complementary* research with the significant others involved with such identity projects. That is, rather than survey-based investigations of what senior managers consider *in the abstract* to be the attributes and competences required of managers, there is need for the grounded study of warranting, *in practice*, of identity ascription. Ideally, this should be undertaken alongside the study of claim warranting, although the 'politics' of organisations may place obstacles in the way of such holistic and synchronised study of both claim warranting and ascription warranting.

This problem would particularly apply where the outcomes were deemed to be less-than-happy, ie where there is disaffirmation of claim, that is, the warrants deployed have not been 'honoured'. Even if the holistic, synchronised study were not feasible, this area does suggest fruitful areas for further research with individuals who have experienced such adverse judgements. The emergent structural changes in managerial occupations and careers would, ostensibly, be resulting in many instances where individuals have been confronted with adverse judgements, often in contrast to confident expectations. Studies such as those by Collin (1986) on subjective career, and Scase and Goffee (1989) on 'reluctant managers' might be fruitfully reworked in terms of the notion of hazard in the 'publication' phase of Harré's model, and of warranting in respect of identity claim and affirmation (or, in this case, disaffirmation).

10.4 Beyond graduation

Whilst the notion of what it means to be a manager would appear, intuitively and from the interviews with the novice managers, to be fairly well-understood, the position is less clear for graduates. Although the term 'graduate' may be taken to mean someone who has formally been awarded a first degree, what this means in terms of its social salience is less clear. In respect of employment, it is clear that the traditional notion of a 'graduate job' is no longer valid (Brown and Scase, 1994; Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1995; Connor and Pollard, 1996; Pearson et al, 1997; Harvey et al, 1997). Many graduates do not enter jobs which are *formally* designated as requiring a degree for entry, but where *being a graduate* provides an advantage over non-graduates; often graduates experience a fairly lengthy period of time before entering either a 'graduate job' or a job where their graduate status provides an advantage (Elias, 1999).

This raises questions about the extent to which the notion of 'graduate identity', in respect of employment, might be meaningful. However, given that considerable recent policy debate and development, and public funding, concerns the perceived need for more graduates, and that having a degree is associated with considerably higher earnings than otherwise expected, 'being a graduate' still has social significance. It may therefore be argued that the diversity of graduate employment and its changing character emphasises that what 'being a graduate' means is subject to the kind of interpretative and interactional processes discussed here. The concept of 'graduate identity' would therefore have considerable analytical utility in exploring the issues which are of contemporary concern regarding the transition of graduates into employment. In the most general terms, and related to the

conventional notion of a 'graduate job', 'being a graduate' may be taken as meaning 'worthy of employment as a graduate'. In so far as employers are recruiting graduates for jobs not hitherto designated as 'graduate jobs', 'being a graduate' may be taken as having particular and local meaning, ie 'worthy of employment *here in this job, because* they are a graduate'. The concept of 'graduate identity' in relation to employment carries both meanings, with the first perhaps being its primary meaning in use.

The identity trajectory of a graduate may be considered by relating the key stages of the move from graduation to initial job, experience in that initial job, and moving on and experience in current job. Each of these stages may be considered as involving a claim on graduate identity, and corresponding affirmation/ disaffirmation, which are based on and evoke warranting. The interviews sought information from the respondents on what they had aspired to do on graduating and what happened in terms of employment immediately after graduating. There was variation, amongst the interviewees, on the extent they had clear aspirations about the type of work they aspired to, as they came to the end of their degree courses. Some were very unsure, or had vague ideas about how they would utilise their degree subject, and thus of how they would warrant their claim on a graduate identity:

> SA: When I left I think I was a bit muddled in what I wanted to do.
>
> SF: I didn't feel I really knew what I wanted to do, and didn't want to get sucked into doing something.
>
> SC: ...when I graduated it was the recession and it was difficult to find jobs, and I wasn't too sure what I wanted.
>
> SD: Initially, I thought I'd want a language job that would use French and Spanish ..."

Some were clear about what they wanted, but found their aspirations were blocked, ie

the claim was disaffirmed, and the warrant not honoured. In the case of SL, his degree classification was an obstacle to realising his aim:

> SL: My aspirations when I finished university were to train as a clinical psychologist initially. I graduated with a 2.2 and so didn't get to the interview stage for clinical psychology.

This reinforces the point that identity construction implicates factors outside face to face encounter.

The path from formal graduation to first job also varied. Some went straight into what would be seen as a 'graduate job'. In the case of those who remained unemployed, there were variations in responses: some continued applying for 'graduate jobs', some took on non-graduate jobs, some undertook further study. The latter option may be seen as an alternative mode of claiming graduate identity, in respect of graduate-level study, where the claim has been disaffirmed in the employment arena. In the case of three individuals who entered 'graduate jobs' on completion of their courses, a number of different factors seemed to have affected the decision. Degree subject was relevant in two cases, providing a straightforward warrant for the identity claim. SD was seeking a job to use her degree subject of modern languages, and took a job as a bilingual administrator. SN had taken a degree in travel and tourism and had previously worked for a summer with a tour operator. She obtained a post as a sales executive for a hotel with considerable and developing tourist business. However, both these graduates moved from these jobs very quickly.

The situation of *not* gaining a 'graduate job' is of particular interest, as it places the individual in zone X with the prospect of moving into zone 2, where the claim on the graduate identity is not affirmed. A variety of responses were made to this situation. One was to continue the search for a job deemed appropriate: SC eventually settling for a secretarial job which was not advertised specifically for a

graduate. SA persisted but without success; travel to stay with relatives in Pakistan led to an intense desire to 'make something' of himself, and so he undertook further training on his return. However, SF deliberately chose not to seek a 'graduate job', and decided to travel with a friend, undertaking temporary secretarial jobs. SL decided to study for an MSc, to build his 'academic portfolio', after his degree classification proved a barrier for entry to his desired field of clinical psychology. Thus there was exhibited a variety in the types of warranting, deployed for maintenance of identity claim by those for whom affirmation of the claim is not initially forthcoming.

As stated above, three respondents who went straight into jobs as graduates soon left those posts. SN disliked the hotel where she was working. SD found her job with a management consultancy firm (a subsidiary of a major manufacturing company) was not demanding; she realised she really wanted to work in accountancy. Thus the identity trajectories which result from initial claim and affirmation may lead to a situation in which they review those decisions and their aspirations, to disclaim the identity which they have achieved and seek to warrant a different understanding of their graduate identity.

In the cases of the graduates in the smaller companies, most claimed success (achieved identity) in their current jobs:

> SN: ... people take me seriously now because things are actually happening and bringing benefits to the hotel. Things have been a success.
>
> SC: I mean I've proven myself.

In terms of what the graduates had experienced, or would expect, as different about working for a smaller company, a number of aspects were expressed. These were very much in line with what would normally be expected as characteristic of a graduate level job, and thus to provide affirmation of their graduate identity, eg being given

responsibility, having autonomy, being able to make a contribution.

> SC: Working in a small organisation ... you're able to work on projects and get much more autonomy and responsibility at a quicker level, I think, than in a larger company.
>
> SM: What I've found in a large company is that no matter how knowledgeable you are, no matter what qualifications you have, if you have a certain position they expect you to keep to that position ... if you tried to make some contribution to another department, it's very unlikely they'd let you because they already have people who cover that department.
>
> SD: I think ... the position gives me a lot of responsibility and I'm basically ... the only person that does the accounts, and so I'm responsible...
>
> SF: ...this is the kind of company where if they feel like you can do more, then you're given the opportunity rapidly.

This would seem to support the suggestions that small and medium-sized companies will become increasingly attractive to graduates (see Williams and Owen, 1997).

However, against this, many also talked about moving on; some were now actively seeking new jobs, others spoke of planning to do so within a short period. No particular desire to stay with a smaller company was expressed, which may suggest that understandings of graduate identity, amongst graduates themselves, remain focussed around notions of working for a larger organisation.

10.5 Conclusion

This chapter has deployed the concept of emergent identity, as explored in the previous chapter, in the examination of interviews with novice managers and graduates, in relation to their entry into and experience within the arenas of their desired employment. This has been undertaken in terms of trajectories involving identity claim/disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation, and of the warranting of such claims. Although the number of managers and graduates interviewed is relatively

small compared with the large-scale survey work typical of studies in this area, the analytical concepts used were found to illuminate a number of key issues, and suggest novel areas for further investigation.

In the next, final chapter, we shall draw together the analysis in the thesis.

Chapter 11

Higher-Level Learning and Competence and the Relational Perspective

11.1 Introduction

This thesis has been concerned to open up what may be seen as a prematurely closed debate regarding the nature of learning and competence in respect of graduate employability and entry to managerial positions. In this final chapter, the key points of the argument presented will be reviewed, followed by further discussion of a number of key issues. Whilst the focus, in respect of higher education, has been on graduate employability, we should recognise that preparation for post-graduation employment is not the sole purpose of study for a degree. This will be addressed by discussion of what may be regarded as a complementary aspect of the 'graduate identity', that of claiming the right to re-enter higher education for post-graduation study. This will be explored in terms of what will be called the 'double warrant'. Following that discussion, we shall consider a fairly recent development in the conceptualisation of learning, that of 'situated learning', as presented by Lave and Wenger (1991). Points of similarity and of difference will be examined.

This chapter will also consider implications of the perspective which this thesis has sought to develop. These include implications in terms of pedagogic practice, where the identity-practice model will be related to particular teaching methods, or, to use the currently dominant phrase, 'learning and teaching methods'. Issues for further research will be outlined, and will be argued that the relational

perspective provides a potentially fruitful basis for new areas of investigation. Finally, some issues for policy will be presented and discussed.

11.2 Review of the argument in the thesis

The thesis has taken as its focus the mode of framing of

- the processes of entry by graduates into, and their progression within employment, and
- the processes of entry by individuals into management positions, and their progression within such positions

in relation to notions of leaning and competence. In chapter 2, we examined the *dominant* mode of framing, which we termed the '*conventional model of learning and competence*', which was shown to underpin the *set* of policy initiatives, of policy advocacy, and of practice advocacy, termed the '*learning and competence agenda*'. After considering the issues which arose in relevant literature in this area, the claims made for the conventional model were examined, using primary empirical material (chapter 5) and secondary sources (chapter 6). It was argued from such investigations that the claims made could not be sustained by the empirical evidence. This was taken as warranting more detailed consideration of the concepts used by the conventional model.

In chapter 7, the concepts of learning and competence were subjected to analysis, using the approach of linguistic philosophers, particularly Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein. It was argued that there is *systematic ambiguity* in these terms, which have different although related meanings in different contexts of use. In respect of the concerns here, it was argued that attributions of learning and competence were better

seen as expressions of *judgements*, performative rather than descriptive; such judgements related to *anticipated future behaviour or performance*. Chapter 8 examined the nature of human social behaviour in respect of its interpretive character. Drawing upon the ethogenics approach to social psychology, and approaches to micro-level social science, the *practice-identity model of performance* was developed, arguing that the interpretation/ construal of situated activity as performance-of-a-particular-kind requires that there be a set of practices, and a set of identities, appropriate to the arena in which the behaviour in question occurs. Because higher-level occupations typically relate to practices which defy clear specification in performance terms, the role of identity is of primary significance. Chapter 9 further extended the analysis of identity, developing this in terms of the concept of '*emergent identity*', and of the '*claim-affirmation*' model. The model was used in chapter 10 to reconsider the interviews conducted with graduates and with 'novice' managers, and was found to yield significant findings not amenable to research conducted within the conventional model's framing.

The term 'relational perspective' was adopted for the alternative approach which may be seen as arising from the argument in the latter part of the thesis (from chapter 7). Under the relational perspective, learning is no longer viewed as an internal process, within individuals, which results in particular outcomes (competence, competencies, skills and so on), which then are expressed in performance. Rather, the discourse or language of 'learning' and 'competence' is used within particular social practices and processes by which individuals gain, or fail to gain, entry into particular social arenas, principally (for this thesis) graduate

employment and managerial occupations. Such language provides the *convention of warrant* (Gergen, 1989) for the judgements and decisions which enable or prevent such entry, and enable or prevent progression within such arenas.

This is not a one-sided process, in which individuals seeking entry are subject to the judgements made and warranted by those who are 'gatekeepers' to such arenas. Rather, the individuals themselves may engage in forms of interaction seeking to warrant their claims on the relevant identity for entry. Similarly, having gained entry, the claims by individuals, and the affirmation or disaffirmations by others, are subject to negotiation through warranting processes. Having undertaken educational and training programmes, and the possession of particular qualifications, provide for strong warrants within contemporary society. However, these may often not be sufficient, and the use of the language of 'competence' (and 'competencies'), 'skills', 'capabilities' and the like may be deployed in the negotiation over meaning of activity in the past (in order to agin entry), or in the present (in respect of accounting for activity which may be contested), whereby such activity is construed as instantiation of relevant practices ie as certain types of performance.

11.3 Graduate identity and the 'double warrant'

In respect of higher education, taking such an approach, we may say that what is socially consequential is not so much the formal possession of a degree but the social accomplishment of an emergent identity as a graduate. This has been explored so far mainly with regard to graduate employability, the grounds on which the debate is primarily conducted. However, we should note that "being a graduate" is socially consequential not only in the employment arena; it is the basis on which re-entry to

higher education is obtained, for advanced study and particularly for higher degrees by research. In terms of the perspective developed here, we may say that there is a *dual* process of warranting, or a '*double warrant*' at work in the claim-affirmation processes with respect to graduate identity.

The skills agenda in higher education has little to say about this other aspect of the post-graduation trajectories of graduates, except to assert that the concept of "key skills" applies also to advanced study. After all, it is argued, research is just a form of problem solving, and oral and written forms of communication are required in work for a higher degree. However, if we use the term "knowledge" in a general sense to express what constitute the practices in the arena of graduate employment and also the practices in academia, we can identify some critical differences between these two arenas. In the employment arena, we would say that knowledge is *applied* whereas in academia knowledge is *produced*. Whilst Gibbons et al. (1994) correctly argue that knowledge production certainly takes place in other arenas , its production *within academia* is characterised by, or at least *espouses*, particular values of universalism, open access, and essential contestability. Higher education is a 'critical business' (Barnett, 1990; 1997). By contrast, in the employment arena knowledge is taken as an asset to be closely guarded; once certain knowledge claims are taken as being the basis for organisational decisions, such claims take on the character of incontestability[1]. The style of textual communication differs largely because the

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1 That is, for an employee to contest the knowledge claims on which are based senior managerial decisions is likely to be viewed as 'disloyalty', or 'lack of commitment', and to have significant consequences both for that person's identity *as* an employee and for the prospects of contestation by other employees.

conventions of business and of academic writing have arisen under different orientations to knowledge, its application and its production.

Confusion between these different modes of warranting the graduate identity is likely to hinder rather than help individuals in moving between the different social arenas of employment and academia. Whilst the relational perspective developed here accepts the importance of examining the relationship between degree level study and post-graduation employment, it would also value the relationship between such study and post-graduate study. This suggests the need for an emphasis in the undergraduate curriculum for students not only to engage with what is taken to be the body of knowledge in a field, for the purposes of application of such knowledge, but also for them to engage with this as a set of *knowledge claims* which may be regarded as essentially contestable.

11.4 Situated learning: a convivial perspective?

In chapter 3, we examined the main forms of psychological theorisation of learning, in relation to the conventional model of learning and competence. Insofar as protagonists for the learning and competence agenda advocate particular approaches to pedagogic practice, these tend to be justified in terms of the andragogical, humanistic and experiential approaches. In particular, the latter approach is often emphasised, especially in terms of the Kolb Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984). Under such theorisations, learning is regarded as an individualised process of internalisation. However, over the past decade, there has been an increasing focus upon the *social* and *situated* nature of learning, in which the focus is upon *participation* within 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger,

1998).

Lave and Wenger seek to formulate learning as "a dimension of social practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 47), the central feature of which is what they term "legitimate peripheral participation". By this, they explain, they mean to draw attention

> "to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community."
> (op.cit.: 29)

Their analysis draws upon studies of historical forms of apprenticeship[2] to develop a "historical-cultural theory" of situated learning. Conventional explanations of learning regard this as a process by which knowledge is *internalised*, which

> "establishes a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside, suggests that knowledge is largely cerebral, and takes the individual as the nonproblematic unit of analysis. [...] learning as internalization is too easily construed as an unproblematic process of absorbing the given, as a matter of transmission and assimilation."
> (op. cit.: 47)

In contrast to this, viewing learning as "increasing participation in communities of practice" is concerned with the whole person acting in the world, thus focussing attention

> "on ways in which it is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations [...] consistent with a relational view, of persons, their actions, and the world."
> (op. cit.: 50)

In the Lave and Wenger analysis, two key notions recur: practice and identity.

Critically, in respect of the main argument of this thesis, learning is seen as implying

> "becoming a full participant [in a social community], a member, a kind of person. [...] Learning thus implied becoming a different person with respect

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2 Five cases are cited: Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, naval quartermasters, meat cutters, and nondrinking alcoholics.

> to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations [...] Learning involves the construction of identities."
> (op. cit.: 53)

Clearly, the analysis by Lave and Wenger is convivial with that undertaken here, although originating from different modes of analysis. There appears to be considerable scope for further study which seeks to explore both the relational perspective and the situated learning approach. However, there are some areas of difference, in addition to origination, that may be noted. The legitimate peripheral participation model does not primarily focus on *formal* education. This may tend to give credence to those aspects of the learning and competence agenda which would regard 'informal learning' as of greater value than formal education and training, particularly protagonists for accreditation of prior *experiential* learning (Evans, 1994). In effect, situated learning theory may become harnessed to the learning and competence agenda, and be incorporated into the conventional model. This *not* to argue that what is termed 'informal learning' is itself *inferior* to formal education and training; there are various routes by which an individual may become, in Lave and Wenger's terms, a participant in a community of practice, or, in our terms, have an 'agreed identity' in respect of a particular social arena.

This relates to the concept of identity as used by Lave and Wenger. This is clearly one of *membership*, ie of a community of practitioners. However, there is no indication in Lave and Wenger's analysis of how a person gains entry to the process of legitimate peripheral participation. In effect, a person's identity is initially what we have termed 'under-determined', ie in 'zone X' in the model in figure 9.3. Education

and training may be viewed as providing for initial entry, ie in zone 1.

The concept of *community of practitioners* is also problematic with respect to management. It is unclear who is to be included in such a community, who are the practitioners. If we include *only managers*, there is the question of where we locate those who are managed. Lave and Wenger also use the term 'community of practice' (cf Wenger, 1998). But if practice is situated, would this not include those who are members of the community in which management is practised, ie the members of the organisational setting? In contrast, our own analysis has left open the issue of who is involved in what might be better termed the 'social arenas of practice'. The set of identities in relation to management should be taken as including those who are viewed as 'the managed'. As we saw in case study 5, in chapter 10, the manager concerned (NE) found his claim on the managerial identity was challenged by a subordinate, whose own claim on the managerial identity had been disaffirmed.

Overall, however, there are clear lines of convergence between the two approaches, and potential for further research and theoretical development.

11.5 Prospects for further research

The qualitative research approach undertaken here may be contrasted with the survey-based, quantitative research typical in these fields (eg Elias, 1999; Purcell, 1999; DTZ Pieda Consulting, 2000; Pearson et al., 2000). One main contrast is in terms of *scale*, ie the number of persons interviewed for this thesis is 36, compared to several hundreds typical for survey-based research. However, survey-based research does not enable us to gain a *grounded* research-based understanding of the processes at work, at the level of individuals seeking and gaining employment. There appears,

therefore, to be considerable scope for further qualitative research of the kind undertaken here, and by others such as Ward and Jenkins (1999) in respect of graduates, and Watson and Harris (1999) in respect of entrants into managerial positions.

The examination of trajectories of graduates and novice managers, undertaken here, focussed solely upon the accounts given by such persons. Yet the claim-affirmation model indicates that there is a need to research the processes involved in identity ascription (affirmation and disaffirmation). Although there has been *qualitative* research undertaken with employers of graduates (eg Harvey et al.: 1997), in addition to survey-based quantitative research, as indicated in chapter 6 such research tends to be pre-emptive, asking employers about 'skills' and 'attributes', rather than allowing them to talk in their own terms. Worse still, as noted with the Harvey et al. (1997), the responses by employers may be inappropriately interpreted as concerning 'skills' when no such term or concept appears to have been used. There is therefore scope for more qualitative research with employers, seeking to understand how they warrant their judgements and decisions when recruiting graduates, and when employing them[3]. This similarly applies in respect of those involved in recruiting and employing novice managers. If possible, there would appear to be considerable value in undertaking such research with individual graduates and managers and with their recruiters and employers, in tandem. In that way, the claim and the ascriptions may be compared.

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3 This would also mean clearly separating research with graduate *recruiters* from that with those who *manage* graduates in employment. The modes of warranting cannot be assumed to be the same.

We should also note the possibility that a career trajectory may include periods in which identity claim is withdrawn (identity disclaimed), and where the claim is disaffirmed. These situations also provide scope for further research. Much of the research on graduate employment is concerned with those who are successful in gaining employment, or with graduates who may have experienced difficulty but who have now gained employment. The accounts given are thus elicited in the context of 'agreed identity'. What may be of significant value is research undertaken with persons who are *currently* experiencing difficulty gaining employment. How do *they* understand the processes by which one may be successful in gaining employment, ie how may identity claim be most effectively warranted? Similarly, much research with managers is undertaken with *current* managers. What happens in cases where an individual loses their position as a manager? How do they deal with such identity disaffirmation? What is their understanding of how they may re-warrant their identity claim?

The focus on emergent identity thus presents considerable scope for further research, both in terms of scale and in respect of substantive questions and issues. However, such research would be primarily qualitative, requiring substantial funding to do on any significant scale. This issue will be discussed in section 11.7, which concerns policy implications.

11.6 Pedagogic applications

Turning now to the pedagogic implications of the relational perspective developed here, we should first recognise that it is concerned with a mode of *framing*, a perspective, a way of viewing the nature and purpose of educational practice. It is

not a teaching[4] method, or set of methods, as such. Nor is the claim being made here that the relational perspective provides for *new* approaches to teaching (and learning); indeed, we may question why we should expect to develop novel approaches, as if novelty were necessarily and obviously a 'good thing'. Rather, the relational perspective orients us towards pedagogic applications which focus on linking the activities undertaken by students and management trainees in the educational setting with the *practices* that are to be found in the social arenas to which they aspire. The task is to enable them to practise and rehearse their performance of such practices, and to do so in an intentional, knowing manner such that they may seek to warrant similar activity as performance of such practices. In specific terms, this may, and is likely to, involve the use of the vocabulary of competence and skills, but without the assumptions that such competence and skills have some separate reality.

The relational perspective would especially emphasise issues of identity claim, and of warranting such identity claim. This would suggest an emphasis upon processes by which individuals engage in tentative claim on the aspired-to identity. The method of role play is well-established in education and training, but often this is used for short, specific elements within a course or programme, eg a class or part of a class session. There may be considerable scope for more time-extensive use of role-play, or perhaps we might say 'identity rehearsal', for example by linking together a set of occasions in which this method is used.

We should note that some methods which are deemed to be effective as

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4 Nor a 'learning method'.

teaching (and learning) approaches may be understood from the relational perspective. Thus mentoring places the novice with an experienced and established worker, that is, someone whose identity position is in zone X ('under-determined') with someone whose identity is in zone 4 ('agreed identity'); moreover, the trajectory tendency is towards zone 4. That is to say, mentoring is a method which tends to affirm the claim on the identity made by the individual[5]. Action learning also tends to provide identity affirmation. The individual manager is placed in a group of other managers, given a significant project to undertake; moreover, the role of the set adviser is *not* that of expert but to facilitate the group. Rather than being viewed as an example of the Kolb cycle in operation (McGill and Beatty, 1992), action learning may be better interpreted under the relational perspective. The use of work-experience within higher education may also be viewed in this light. A standard part of many programmes of study, and a practice which the Government wishes to see as universal (Blunkett, 2000), work experience is generally regarded as providing the opportunity to develop key skills. However, under the relational perspective, we might view it rather as the context in which identity rehearsal may take place, where warranting of the tentative claim on the graduate identity may be practised.

To give further substance to the way in which the relational perspective may be applied in pedagogic practice, the following example is based on the author's own teaching at a new university in London.

Example : Training and Development as Professional Practice

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5 Mentoring would be viewed by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a case of legitimate peripheral participation.

The Human Resource Management electives in the final year of the BA Business Studies includes a module on Training and Development. The module covers the theory and practice of training, within work organisations and in the wider public policy arena. The coursework for the module focusses on the *practice of training within work organisations*, and particularly on the generally accepted principle that such practice should be based on the training cycle model. Two elements of this model, analysing training needs and designing the training programme provide the basis for coursework assignment. Using one of a selection of case studies made available to the students, each student must produce a proposal for analysing the training needs in a particular area, and design an outline training programme for another specified area of need. The proposal for analysing the training needs must be *presented in the form of a report, addressed to the relevant member of senior management*. The proposed design for the training programme must be presented in the form of outline documentation, as this might *normally be presented by training practitioners*.

In discussing the coursework briefing with the class, it is made clear that the students must *not* engage in discussion of theoretical and conceptual matters. Rather, they are required to show through *practical application* that they have a sufficient grasp of the principles involved. The emphasis on the particular forms of documents to be presented is to provide for the students to engage in the *type of activities in which a personnel and training practitioner would engage*. Thus the report is part of the way that the practitioner would seek to gain the support of the senior manager, gaining

and maintaining legitimacy in the identity of a professional practitioner. Students are encouraged to use the active voice and personal pronouns in the report, which must be clearly addressed to a specified senior manager. That is, the student must write *as if they were the practitioner.*

As indicated at the beginning of this section, the relational perspective does not claim to offer novel methods for teaching, but rather draws attention to the key issues of practice and identity. These are issues of *framing*, and suggest different emphases from those which are advocated by the conventional model of learning and competence. More detailed applications of the relational perspective have yet to be developed, but the above discussion suggests that this can be done without undue difficulty.

11.7 Implications for policy

A key implication for policy, arising from the analysis in this thesis, is that the emphasis upon the skills agenda in higher education should be reconsidered. This applies particularly to the DfEE-funded initiatives concerned with graduate employability, which, according to the analysis here are inappropriately-oriented. A corollary of this is for the Department for Education and Employment to provide funding and other support for initiatives which are based on, or supported by, the relational perspective developed in the thesis. This does not necessarily mean abandoning the vocabulary of skills, but avoiding the treatment of them with the 'misplaced concreteness' to which Hyland (1997: 169) refers. The Department should

also provide funding for initiatives concerned with helping those graduates who experience difficulty gaining appropriate employment in the initial post-graduation period, based on the ideas developed in relation to the claim-affirmation model of emergent identity.

At the very least, funding for *research* in this area is likely be of significant value in developing such initiatives. The issue of *funding for research* was briefly alluded to in section 11.5 above. Further research would be necessary in order that policy and practice have the evidence-base which the UK Government espouses (Clarke, 1998). The level of funding support for *pseudo*-research[6] in respect of the learning and competence agenda, rather than a more open research agenda, is a significant problem, as noted by Coffield (1999).

The *requirement* for reference to 'skills' in the various forms of documentation which are required of institutions, for public accountability (ie to the Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency), should, on the basis of the analysis here, be reviewed and possibly revised. Although the use of the term 'skills' may be retained in its *mundane use*, the more *technical* use, eg in respect of detailed specification, should be avoided. Insofar as employability is increasingly becoming a matter on which universities are required to be accountable, the Funding Councils and Quality Assurance Agency should develop methods by which the implications of the relational perspective may be incorporated in reporting and accountability systems.

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6 That is, curriculum development and related projects which include evaluation and dissemination, used to present what is purported to be evidence for the validity of the learning and competence agenda. Portraying such work as 'research' (eg Murphy and Otter, 1999) is specious, given that alternative perspectives are generally absent from the accounts provided.

Similarly, attention should be paid, in policy documentation, to references to 'learning' in phrases such as 'learning and teaching strategy', and the reference to students as 'learners', where such usage implies that learning is an activity. It has been argued in this thesis that such usage is systematically misleading; the resulting confusion is likely to result in attempts at inappropriate pedagogic practices. In particular, this view of learning as an *individualistic* and *internalised process*, sui generis, distracts attention from the *social* character of what counts as learning and skill in respect of entry to, and performance in, graduate employment. The policy aspiration of developing a higher education system within a 'learning society' (NCIHE, 1997), however that learning society may be conceived (cf Hughes and Tight, 1995; Ranson, 1998a), is unlikely to be achieved on such an individualistic view of learning (cf Coffield, 1997).

The case of management education, training and development is less circumscribed by policy issues. The voluntaristic approach to policy in this area has resulted in the failure of NVQs in management to make serious progress[7]. Universities offering their own awards[8] are likely to be less concerned to attempt relate their programmes to the MCI standards. There may, however, be opportunities for *positive* policy developments, given that the last major review of management education, training and development was over 13 years ago. Should there be a review in the near future, it may be possible for the relational perspective to play a significant role in the

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7 In mid-2000, Government withdrew support for the Management and Enterprise Training Organisation, which had replaced the National Forum for Management Education and Development as the lead body for management.

8 Mainly the Master in Business Administration and the Diploma in Management Studies

construction of new policy initiatives.

11.8 Conclusion

This thesis has sought to reconsider the nature of learning and skill in the context of graduate employability and of managerial competence, ie in terms of entry to, and progression within relevant occupational arenas. The dominance of the learning and competence agenda has been shown to be underpinned by what we termed the 'conventional model of learning and competence'. That model was examined in terms of the empirical evidence in its support, which was found to be lacking. Conceptual analysis of the key terms, 'learning', 'competence' (and 'competency', and 'skills', demonstrated that the conventional model was seriously flawed. An alternative '*relational*' model was developed, based on interpretative, interactionist and constructionist approaches within social psychology and micro-sociology. That model reconstructed learning and competence in terms of social practices and emergent identity, the latter being shown to be of primary importance in respect of higher-level occupations. The concept of emergent identity was further explored, both theoretically and in terms of empirical investigation through interview-based accounts of graduates entering employment and individual entering managerial positions. In this final chapter, it has been claimed that the relational perspective provides a fertile basis for further research, for pedagogic application, and in respect of its policy implications.

Appendix

Abbreviation and Acronyms

AGR	Association of Graduate Recruiters
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards (abolished 1992)
CVCP	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (formed in 1995 by merger of Employment Department and Department for Education)
DE	Department of Employment (merged with Department for Education in 1995, to form DfEE)
ED	Employment Department (also called Department of Employment)
EHE	Enterprise in Higher Education
HEC	Higher Education for Capability; an initiative by RSA (q.v.) to encourage institutions of higher education to develop their curricula so that students' all-round 'capability' is developed
MCI	Management Charter Initiative
MSC	Manpower Services Commission (formed in 1974, abolished in 1988)
NAB	National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
RSA	The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
UGC	University Grants Committee

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Note: Where works are published under the authorship of organisations and agencies which have well-recognised acronyms or other abbreviated names, these are listed under such acronyms/ abbreviations. See Appendix 1 for listing.

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